

INTENSITY AS A CHARACTER TRAIT

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Intensity, like boredom, depression, and elation, is an affective state that one may experience subjectively and also recognize in others. Intensity suggests a tendency to become eagerly absorbed in what stimuli the environment provides, (in this respect, it is the opposite of boredom), and indicates an active, energetic quality in this absorption. Though the intense individual actively seeks gratification in the environment he does not appear to find it. Much of his activity is a preparation for some future satisfaction, and what pleasure he experiences is mainly in the nature of eager anticipation.

The heightened muscle tone and rapid speech of the intense individual indicate a tendency to motor discharge, yet this motor discharge does not result in an appreciably lowered tension level. It would seem that the intense individual unconsciously avoids experiences of gratification, but by his intensity denies this avoidance. His dammed-up drive energy is partially discharged in activities of preparation, but his constant frustration due to unconscious avoidance of satisfaction results, in spite of this motor discharge, in a high level of tension.

It is not correct to consider intensity a simple character defense. Rather, it is the end result of certain complex defense mechanisms. This is in line with the formulation of Jacobson and Bibring, quoted by Greenson (3), about boredom—an affective state in some ways similar to intensity—in that both intensity and boredom describe a relationship to experience which has an affect quality.

Fenichel (1) investigated a kind of boredom characterized by repression of the aim and object of the drive while the drive tension is experienced. The subject tries to deal with his boredom by a kind of externalization; he turns to the outside world 'not in order to act upon it with his instinctual impulses, but rather to be helped by it to find an instinctual aim which he lacks'. He has difficulty in finding an object and aim because

they are apt to be either too close to, or too far removed from, the repressed ones. The intense individual also suffers—because of repression—from an impairment of his ability to find gratification. He, too, turns to the outside world, but unlike the bored individual he eagerly embraces some aim and object suggested by the environment. Though his pursuit of this object does not lead to gratification, the seeming intensity of his interest in it helps him to deny his underlying boredom.

The above formulations concerning intensity suggest that in certain ways the character structure of the intense individual resembles that of the hyperemotional character described by Fenichel (2). According to Fenichel, the hyperemotional character has repressed his true emotions, and replaced these by 'pseudo emotions' that nonetheless draw some of their energies from the repressed emotions. Siegman (4) has similarly conceived hysterical emotionality.

Miss K came to analysis because at thirty-four she was unmarried. Though she showed an intense, eager approach to her analysis, a factor in making her a good patient, there were times when her eagerness seemed unrelated to what she was saying. She would abruptly drop a topic in which she seemed excitedly absorbed to turn to a new topic with the same show of absorption. When she could find nothing of interest to say, she became not desultory but frustrated or discouraged. Though she did not consider her intensity a major symptom, she did at times consider it undesirable, saying, for instance, 'I am too intense; I run things into the ground; it alienates people; men don't like it'.

The patient, the youngest of five children, was born and reared in a small Canadian town. Her parents were frugal, hardworking, religious, and pillars of the community. Behavior in the home was constrained; open expression of anger was not permitted and demonstrativeness was not encouraged. Intellectual discussions were the accepted means of contact within the family. The earnest, opinionated mother dominated the

family. Miss K resented what she considered her mother's lack of respect for her gentle, withdrawn father, and tried to bolster his self-esteem. She felt also that her father must be disgusted by her mother's 'lack of fastidiousness in personal hygiene'.

Although she had been an active, energetic tomboy, Miss K was lonely as a child. She could not easily relate to her parents and with her brothers she felt like a pest. She felt unable to 'reach' her withdrawn father and resentful of her dominating mother, to whose domination she reacted by covert stubbornness or by withdrawal to the bathroom, where she could 're-establish' herself. When her mother was tense or irritable, the whole family would feel tense until the mother's mood had passed. Miss K's main companions during childhood were her brothers. To ingratiate herself with them, she made fun of feminine girls 'who spent all day looking in the mirror'.

In high school, she feared rejection by the 'right crowd'. Scorning her mother as a model, she studiously imitated the behavior of the popular girls, especially their behavior with boys. In college, she continued to struggle to be successful with men. She did well in school work, becoming 'frantic' if she fell behind in it. At twenty, she became engaged, but broke the engagement because of her mother's disapproval of the boy and, in compliance with her mother's wishes, moved to another part of the country in order to forget him. In her middle twenties, she settled in a west coast city, where she found work as a television script writer. She had a number of love affairs which were unsuccessful because the men were either fascinating but unattainable, or attainable but boring. She sought analysis after the failure of an affair with a 'highly proper and elegant' lawyer.

In analysis, Miss K's interest quickly centered on the relationship to the analyst, wherein she repeated her childhood frustration of being unable to 'reach' her idealized father. She feared the therapist could never understand or condone her dirty sexual ideas; like her father, he would be disappointed if she were not a 'sweet, old-fashioned girl'. Her first dream, motivated by the paper napkin over the pillow on the analytic couch, was

of grease flowing off her hair onto the couch. For the first six months of therapy, she felt nauseated and tense every morning before her session. Her nausea, related to the idea that the therapist would be disgusted with her, disappeared during the session as she found her fears unrealized. This fear of disgusting him diminished after she made a series of confessions concerning her feelings of dirtiness and sexual inadequacy.

Miss K struggled to make 'her world' understandable to the therapist: she showed exaggerated optimism about the analysis if she felt understood; exaggerated pessimism if she failed to 'get herself across'. She compared her effort to 'reach' the therapist with the way she would, in her childhood, rush up to her father and greet him enthusiastically so as to force him to embrace her. Thus during the first phase of her analysis, Miss K's intensity was part of her attempt to compel the therapist to be interested in her and to break through the barriers to 'make contact' with him. These barriers, which were of course internal, she tended to perceive as external—as part of the therapist's personality. The patient's dreams suggested that guilt over her oedipal wishes was the main barrier to her 'making contact' with the male therapist. In one dream, the therapist, represented as a priest, witnessed the patient yelling in anger at a woman acquaintance. In another dream the patient visited him and was surprised to find his wife friendly. In several dreams the patient and the therapist were wrestling playfully. Miss K spoke of her interest in married men, which she explained was due to the fact that all the attractive men her age were married.

During this first period of the analysis, Miss K was quite inhibited in the expression of her feelings. After the therapist pointed out her discomfort when complaining about a male rival at work, she recalled that she had never been allowed to complain at home, or to feel sorry for herself. As she came to understand her fear of self-pity and of anger, she was able to express these affects more boldly, and to fear them less. (In accordance with the suggestion that intensity may serve to deny a fear of strong affects, it seems likely that Miss K's gradually

diminishing fear of affect expression during the therapy was a factor in the gradual diminution of her intensity.)

After Miss K became more comfortable in the analysis, she continued to be preoccupied with the theme of contact. She complained of feeling 'nowhere' and 'out of touch'. Her association to one of the dreams of wrestling with the therapist led to the understanding that her need for contact had an underlying physical meaning; to touch the therapist would assure her that there was a relationship, that she was no longer 'out of touch'. In this connection, she recalled occasions from her childhood when she talked at the dinner table and was ignored. She would talk louder and louder, and more and more extravagantly, in an attempt to arouse interest. Failing this, she continued to talk so as to deny her feelings of humiliation and boredom. Her intensity during the analytic hours served the same function of compelling a show of interest in order to diminish her feelings of insignificance and boredom.

The patient's intensity in the therapy was related to her weak sense of identity. This was not the result of an oral fixation, but rather a regression from the oedipal conflict to a phallic-urethral level with resulting confusion of sexual identity and partial oral regression. She was in danger of feeling out of touch with herself as well as with the therapist. Suddenly, as she was talking, she would hear her words as she imagined he would hear them from 'the outside'. The playful wrestling in her dreams was one solution to the problem of being separate (fighting) and close (playing) at the same time: the stimulation of the body surface in the wrestling would increase the sense of self as well as the feeling of contact with the therapist. Being intense was also an attempt to feel herself as a separate individual and at the same time in touch with the therapist.

About eight months after entering treatment, Miss K began an affair with a married man, C. She had been a casual friend of C's wife, whom she admired for her sophistication. The patient saw readily that, with C, she was attempting to satisfy the wish for contact which was frustrated in the therapy. She broke

off the relationship several times because of her feeling of guilt toward the wife. Dreams of rivalry with her mother linked the present conflict (clearly an oedipal one) with her childhood experiences. She remembered her frequent unsuccessful attempts to gain her father as an ally against her mother, and her pity for her mother whom she had regarded as less attractive than herself. She became comfortable in the affair only after C's wife announced her intention of obtaining a divorce and remarrying. Even then she remained uncertain as to whether or not she wished to marry C. At times she felt trapped in the relationship and wanted to be alone so as to 're-establish' herself. She had a sense of guilt about feeling superior to him intellectually, and feared that she might humiliate him—that she was showing him the same lack of respect that her mother had shown her father.

Their sexual relationship was at first satisfactory. C was admiring, patient, and tender. Through his eyes she saw herself as glamorous and desirable. It pleased her to think that she had taught him various sexual techniques; that she was the 'power behind the throne'. As the relationship went on, she began to feel dirty and unattractive, and to need more and more reassurance that C was not disgusted by her. She felt disgust for her vagina, and envy of the clean male organ and of the man's control of the intercourse. At this time Miss K remembered her childhood envy of her brothers for their 'superior' sexual organs and for their greater control in urination. Her rivalry with the therapist became overt and intense. She envied him his 'calm, controlled demeanor'. She longed to sit up so that she could be equal to the therapist and bring her 'personality to bear' on him. This suggests that Miss K's character trait of intensity was supported by her phallic (urethral), competitive drives.

During the first phase of this affair, there had been frequent, prolonged intercourse, sometimes for an hour in the evening and again in the morning. She was proud of this behavior, considering it a mark of strong sexuality, and angry when the therapist suggested that she discuss its meaning. Reluctantly, she recognized that she feared sexual excitement and that the intercourse

was prolonged in order to delay orgasm. Her sexual behavior can be taken as a paradigm of one aspect of her intensity: by her 'intense interest' in intercourse she denied her fear of sexual excitation. She displaced the emphasis from final gratification (orgasm) to preparation for gratification.

After they decided to marry, C became less persistently admiring of her, and at times actually critical. This change aggravated her fear of being trapped and humiliated by him. She now remembered humiliation at the hands of her mother, whose attempts to 'organize' her seemed disrespectful and intrusive.

Further light was cast upon the meaning of Miss K's intensity when her parents came to the wedding; and she was confronted with her mother's tense, impatient personality. Her mother nagged her with such questions as, 'Who will get the flowers?', 'Who will be the ushers?'. After an evening with her mother, the patient came to the hour with the original 'intense' demeanor: she was breathing hard and talking fast, and her body was tense. When, halfway through the hour, she realized she was acting like her mother, she abruptly changed and during the remainder of the hour analyzed her behavior in a relaxed way. To remain calm while her mother was wrought up was to expose her mother as foolish. By being intense and hence, like her mother, unattractive, she was renouncing her feeling of superiority to her mother in the rivalry for her father; being intense was also an attempt to reach her father as her mother had.

In this paper a complete analysis of the patient's intensity has not been attempted. Varied motivations from all levels of psychic development must find expression in such a character trait and to enumerate all of them is to lose sight of the principal motivations.

As a child, this patient was unable to relate easily to her parents and brothers. In this situation her hyperactivity constituted a motor discharge of energy that could not be discharged as affect. As an adult, the intensity was, in part, a continuation of the hyperactivity of her childhood. An aspect of the intensity

was the fear of strong affects, as well as fear of gratification, which resulted in a damming up of drive energy, again only partially discharged in motor activity. By this intensity she was able to deny her fear of gratification. For example, by seemingly intense and energetic interest in the forepleasure, she denied her fear of the orgasm. Her intensity was supported by her phallic-urethral drives, which found expression in her rivalry with her brothers. As a child she had been jealous of her brothers' urinary exploits; in the transference, she was jealous of the analyst's control. She was reluctant to lie down on the analyst's couch, fearing she could not bring her 'personality to bear' on the therapist.

As has been seen, the patient's intensity was part of an attempt to overcome barriers to 'feeling contact', derived from all levels of psychic development. On the oral level the intensity was an attempt to feel a sense of self and yet to 'feel contact' with the object—to be close to the object without incorporating it. A kind of projection is implied here: 'It is not I who am reluctant to be close, but the object, so I must rouse it by my enthusiasm'. However, guilt over oedipal strivings was the major barrier to her 'feeling contact' with her father, and, in adult life, with men.

The similarities between intensity and boredom, commented upon at the beginning of this paper, may be illustrated by this patient's intensity in her relationship with her father: her libidinal interest in him was repressed mainly by oedipal guilt, so that she was in danger of feeling out of contact (bored) with him. Her intensity with him denied and overcame this loss of contact, and also expressed the forbidden oedipal impulses. Further, her repudiation of her identification with her mother left her with a feeling of emptiness (3), which she covered up by her intensity. But in so doing, she was also expressing the warded off identification with her mother, who was herself intense.

It would seem pertinent, since the patient's intensity has been discussed from so many points of view, to consider her personality in terms of her psychosexual development. Her major

conflict, as it developed in the transference neurosis, was over libidinal impulses to the analyst which were repressed due to oedipal guilt. Frustration in the transference led to regression to the phallic-urethral level and revived in the transference her rivalry with her brothers. Conflict over these phallic impulses led to confusion about sexual identity, and partial regression to orality.

SUMMARY

The intense individual avoids ultimate gratification to avoid dangers originating in various phases of development: on the oral level, incorporation and destruction of the object; on the oedipal level, guilt over sexual impulses. The avoidance of gratification results in a constant damming up of energy which the intense individual tends to discharge in motor activity. By eagerly anticipating deferred gratification, unconsciously forbidden, the intense individual avoids anxiety connected with gratification and by his intensity denies this avoidance.

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