

3. *Sexuality and aggression*

This chapter is taken from an earlier book titled *Aggression and Sexuality*. In those years, starting from the Gestalt principle of figure/ground¹, we hypothesized that, if aggression develops from a background in which sexuality circulates with its characteristics of love, care, creativity and union, the destructive component of the former is limited. Furthermore, aggression is influenced to use a greater deconstructive capacity to make a new construction easier (Pizzimenti, 2015). In this book, we will reverse the terms to support the thesis that, if sexuality develops from a background in which aggression (and, in particular, dental aggression) is present, it will also be limited by the latter in its fusional dependency component and influenced to maintain a greater autonomy in love relationships.

Sexuality and aggression are instincts, two fundamental energies naturally balanced in the animal world. We speak of *instinct* in its etymological sense since it is the organism's response to a simultaneous development of an internal and external stimulus. The instinct to eat would never have developed if it had not evolved in an environment where food was available. And a sexual instinct would never have developed except as part of an evolution that led to a separation of the sexes as the basis for procreation.

Perls deemed a balanced relationship between hunger and sexuality. A balance that is not painless, but very stable... except for human beings.

Women's loss of estrus, in fact, is one of the factors that has made sexual desire and satisfaction possible at any time, breaking this balance. Thus, the erotic dimension of human sexuality was born: the biological component expressed by the hormonal drive is only a premise, albeit an indispensable one, while the creative and individual dimension takes over. In fact, sexual intercourse acquires new meanings already in primates (monkeys): it becomes a game and a way of reconciliation.

Pleasure became a powerful support for the creation of stable couples, opening the way for the development of a social model largely based on the control of this sexuality, now devoid of the rigid physiological and temporal boundaries typical of the animal world. Human societies, as we know them today, were born.

The female orgasm, according to this hypothesis, is an evolutionary discovery: pleasure is no longer limited to a few fertile days within a month, instead it is possible at any time. If we accept that the animal and human female unconsciously 'chooses' the best genetic father for her children, the one who ensures their best survival, her orgasm would facilitate the outcome of that choice. In fact, the contractions of the genital musculature would favour the path of the spermatozoa belonging to the male with whom she is copulating, considered more suitable to the detriment of others, facilitating their race to fertilise the ovum. At a time when society was taking its first steps into a vast world full of dangers that continually threatened to make it extinct, pleasure became a powerful ally of the reproductive needs of the human species (Baldaro Verde and Todella, 2005). There are many advantages for both: for instance, it motivates the male to stay close to the female and take care of the newborn, especially when she is more vulnerable and less self-sufficient as she is busy raising the offspring. Thus, the 'quality' of pleasure transforms sexuality into eros, which is absent in the purely biological dimension. For human beings, it becomes a creative and shared experience, where the body unites with the psyche to the most explosive degree in amorous passion, where the deepest emotions come into play.

Aggression is one of the defining characteristics of animals and is closely related to hunger. Aggressing means going out into the world, taking what we need and destroying it to make it assimilable. As Konrad Lorenz (1969) says, we cannot be non-aggressive, we can only choose where and how to direct our aggression. Choice and responsibility are fundamental ethical issues (Quattrini, 2015a). For example, choosing to use aggression for sexual satisfaction leads to abuse, which is no longer an exchange, but an appropriation, as in rape.

The instinct of sexuality, on the other hand, is connected to pleasure and creativity. To be sexual is to feel the separation between me and the world and to experience the pleasure of bridging this separation through the consummation of the creative act. We cannot be non-sexual, we can only choose how to experience sexuality and what to create. In Chapter IX we see the ethical implications of sexuality as choice and responsibility.

When we practice, we often confront the patient or pupil with two questions:

1. "What are you doing with your aggression?" or "What are we doing with our aggression?"

¹ The figure/ground process is an ingenious discovery of Gestalt psychology that has shown how we, human beings, are only able to sensually perceive a figure – be it a visual image, a sound, a smell, a taste or a tactile stimulus – when it emerges against a background that nourishes this figure by diversity. A background that becomes blurred for us the moment we focus our attention on the figure. If many violins play a symphony in time, we will not be able to distinguish the sound of a single violin. But if one was to be out of time or out of tune, it would emerge and for us it would become a clear and distinguishable figure, while all the others would be part of an anonymous background that would enhance (negatively) by diversity the one out of time. Gestalt therapy then showed the same functioning for our needs, feelings and emotions. If I am hungry, a sandwich in the showcase will make that café stand out among all the other shops on the street. If I am in love with you and I have the impression that you are flirting with another person, the friend who is talking to me will become part of a blurred background while the scene of you with the other person will be the only thing I see in a room full of people. But if you then look at me and wink at me with a smile of complicity, I am reassured, the scene and the experience will melt into the background and the friend who was talking to me will emerge as a figure again. Our whole life is a continuous flow of figures and backgrounds.

It is an important question and recurs quite early in individual therapy as well as in therapy and training groups. Taking responsibility for how I act out my need to move towards the world in order to deconstruct it and make it assimilable for me is a fundamental confrontation in therapy. In the group trainings we work with all the processes relating to aggression in the field: How do I form my boundary in the face of aggression? What effect does my aggression have on the other person? Am I aware of my aggressive impulses? How do I express them? Etc.

2. “What are you doing (or not doing) with your sexuality?” or “What are we doing (or not doing) with our sexuality?”.

For most people in our Eurocentric culture, it is difficult to understand sexuality as a guiding force, which develops its own intentionality of contact, which influences choices in a more or less considerable way. Suffering and pleasure are two important orientations in our lives. We tend to avoid suffering, but it is nevertheless an experience that gives value and depth to choices. Fatigue and suffering give us a sense of commitment and the importance of what we are doing. If I am a professional athlete, the fatigue and suffering that I am able to endure while training feeds me back to the importance the next competition takes on me. The same thing happens with my partner: the suffering that I am able to accept in my relationship gives me a sense of how important that person is to me. These are parameters accepted by common sense and most religions that have always valued suffering as a support to give value and dignity to our lives.

However, not as much importance is attached to pleasure. Yet the latter is a powerful motivator in life. No athlete would face the fatigue and suffering of training if not motivated by the enormous pleasure of finishing a race. No human would endure the fear, uncertainty and even fatigue of entering into a relationship with a stranger if not sustained by the pleasure of being together.

So, the question *What are you doing with your sexuality?* is asking: “How consciously are you relying on this instinct that makes pleasure, enjoyment and exchange the aim of all its actions?”, “How much importance do you give to enjoyment? and “How much do you allow yourself to enjoy and exchange in your life, even here, now, between us?”. “How aware are we of the pleasure we take in our physical closeness?” or “How much does this pleasure support us in dealing with unpleasant situations?”.

Sexuality tends to make both one’s and the other’s boundaries more permeable to allow an ‘exchange’ to take place between us. The means that sexuality uses to achieve this is arousal, which creates vibrations in the boundaries and thus makes them less homogenous. During sexual intercourse, we witness precisely this phenomenon: arousal grows continuously, making boundaries more and more permeable. People exchange emotions, contacts, bodily fluids, until the moment of orgasm, when the boundaries dissolve for a few moments, allowing an experience of fusion with the whole, in which we no longer perceive those differences, which are important for fuelling sexual desire.

By the term ‘sexuality’ we do not always necessarily mean a ‘genital’ involvement, but rather an exchange characterised by a high degree of excitement. The presence of pleasure has a genital origin but it can be exchanged through all the senses and not only through the genitals.

The fundamental characteristics of sexuality are arousal, sensual pleasure and exchange.

What are the consequences of these characteristics?

Arousal results in boundary permeability and need of movement. The person becomes easily influenced, has a desire to influence and needs to act out this influence in the environment, which becomes indispensable and strongly attractive to him/her.

Sensual pleasure results in the identification with the senses: they become the main means of exploration and both the other’s body and mine are in the foreground.

The exchange of pleasure, in whatever form, becomes the primary interest. The pleasure of the other increases my own, which in turn increases that of the other in a continuous bio-feedback phenomenon.

However, pleasure is not exclusively the preserve of sexuality. It is also given by food and, by extension, by appropriation and further on by power. Until recently, ‘powerful’ males were those able to procure abundant food and defend the territory in which they lived (La Rosa, 2015). This made them attractive to females, who then accepted the sexual exchange. This made power more and more attractive to males, to the point where it culturally became a source of pleasure in its own right. “Commanding is better than fucking”, extols an old popular saying. Similarly to the way in which power has become a source of pleasure, that is as a consequence of being able to secure more food and more sex, love in all its forms developed as an extension of sexuality.

Love is a particular form of pleasure related to the experience of caring. To love a person is to care for them and to want their good, at least as long as they are a source of pleasure for us. If the loved one ceases to be so and becomes a source of suffering – as in betrayal, or in the threat of abandonment or in various forms of frustration and childish expectations – then, while continuing to love them, we may no longer want their good. We may start wishing their evil, acting out behaviours such as punishment, abandonment, exile, to the point of beatings or even murder.

Stating that sexuality is always present in love is hard to deny. The relationship between parents and children is steeped in it, as many fathers and mothers often discover to their fears. Freud revealed how most societies have developed the taboo of incest precisely in order to stabilise families, allowing sexuality only between parents and, thus, using the power of attraction of sexuality to strengthen the bond of the couple, the true guarantee of family stability.

Love foregrounds ‘care’ in the Heideggerian sense of the term (Heidegger, 1927): this is what allows many parental couples to continue to ‘function’ even if sexuality disappears completely. The trouble with a couple’s love based only on care is that the

balancing effect of pleasure and enjoyment against sacrifice and 'devoting oneself to...' is lacking. This fact opens the door to experiences no longer of exchange, but of dominance, which promote high internal conflict and/or low or no creativity in couples, often paving the way to depressive experiences. These are couples in which nothing ever changes, or changes are a source of much suffering and little pleasure.

On the other hand, when sexuality is devoid of love, there is a lack of care for the other, who tends to become an 'object of pleasure': the importance of the exchange diminishes and sexuality takes on characteristics similar to hunger, resulting in the emergence of aggressiveness and destructiveness. This is what many women report to their partners, when they reject sexuality because they do not feel to be seen, but feel – or fear – that, at that moment, the man only wants to satisfy a need.

Nevertheless, pleasure and sexuality are underestimated in terms of their educational and transformative importance or they are taken for granted: this has resulted in less theorising about sexuality and the importance of its balancing effect in relation to aggression.

While hunger – and, thus, dental aggression – represents the basic instinct for the survival of the individual, at the level of the species we have sexuality at its base, both because without it there would be no species, but also because of the dimension of love involved in caring for one's own family (one's own tribe, country, etc.).

That balance between hunger and sexuality mentioned by Perls at the beginning and then forgotten, is outlined here: hunger is the fundamental instinct for the survival of the individual and/or the group within its species. Aggression identifies. Sexuality, on the other hand, is the fundamental instinct for the survival of the species by generating new individuals and caring for them. Sexuality makes the species immortal. Biologists have assumed that the earliest life forms on our planet were immortal, in the sense that they did not age and death could only occur by accident (being eaten, etc.). Evolution was a very slow process. The development of the ageing gene, i.e. 'programmed' mortality, has accelerated the phenomenon of evolution, which is favoured by the rapid succession of new generations. This made reproduction fundamental, as the refinement of reproductive modes, including sexuality, which proved successful in the development of complex organisms. Heidegger (1927) stated that we 'are for death' and that the acceptance of 'I die' and not 'We die' makes life authentic. If we understand death as a fundamental evolutionary choice, not an individual, but a 'field' choice, for which, however, it is important that I-individual take responsibility as an active 'projectual' part of this field, then sexuality becomes its completing polarity. If we accept that we 'are for death', we can also accept that we 'are for sexuality', and that this gives authenticity to our existence. Death contextualises my life and sexuality contextualises my individuality.

Aggression leads to destruction, love to healing. Awareness of death generates anguish, awareness of sexuality generates enjoyment. If I accept them both as a source of authenticity, I realise how little sense there is in seeking continuous pleasure at all costs and how many misunderstandings this creates. Two people fall in love, have sex, enjoy themselves a lot and wish this state would never end. Then they begin to live together to enjoy each other every day. Little by little they realise that the pleasure diminishes. Not accepting that their passion must die, they are somehow condemned to a slow decay. For fear of death, they lose its transformative value. They do not accept to break up... only to find each other again. Freud argued that all couples are formed on the basis of neurotic needs and that every couple is destined to break down and separate. If individuals were able to withstand the anguish of death and abandonment, they would separate and eventually choose each other again. At this point, however, the choice would no longer be made to satisfy old fears and childhood needs, and the 'new' couple would be satisfying and nourishing for both (Bellini, 2015).

In human beings, sexuality has greatly expanded its function. In addition to still being the most widespread means of procreation, but no longer the only one, it has developed a fundamental function of creating social bonds, expanding emotional experiences and representing, together with food and game, one of the main sources of pleasure.

Interestingly, religions also tend to make us overcome our fear of death by making our soul, i.e. a part of us, immortal. Religion makes immortal those individuals who can phenomenally feel the mystical experience, so that the soul is not just an introjected belief, but a lived experience. Sexuality makes immortal those individuals who can feel the connection with their children, both biological and metaphorical, as a work of art or an enterprise, perceiving creativity as an experiential and transcendent reality. Sexuality is the basic bodily experience of creative desire, it is what makes us objectively able to create, but not as individuals. The individual cannot be creative alone: the person can experience creativity when he/she feels connected to his/her environment and, in particular, to others.

This applies to all forms of creativity. No artist would be able to create if they were not in contact with an audience, perhaps internalised or hallucinated.

Sexuality is the most powerful engine of social aggregation. For centuries, many societies have used the control of sexuality as a powerful form of control over individuals, through morals and religions.

Wilhelm Reich, with his book on the sexual revolution (1930-1934), hypothesised that the liberation of the individual would pass through the liberation of sexuality. Even today, with the marriage rite, one's ownership of the other's sexuality is sanctioned, so much so that having sex outside marriage is socially and individually experienced as a 'betrayal'. It is interesting to note that *betrayal* is almost exclusively connected with the sexual sphere: if within a couple one of the two confesses to having fallen in love with another, but not having had sex with him/her, this would of course open the door to arguments and perhaps a crisis in the couple, but it would not be experienced as a betrayal. If, on the other hand, one of the two confesses to having had sexual intercourse outside the couple, perhaps occasional and without being in love, the event would immediately be treated as cheating. We no longer use chastity belts, but the possession of each other's genitals remains.

As we have already mentioned, sexuality is the physiological basis of creativity whereas arousal and pleasure are its salient features. It always leads to contact with another being. The genital organs, with their pleasure-generating character, are the seat and root of sexual sensations and the fundamental organs of exchange with the other.

Over time, sexuality has surpassed its exclusively creative function, acquiring other beneficial capacities for human beings. Reich hypothesised that the orgasm played an important function in maintaining health, so much so that he put the lack of orgasm among the causes of many serious illnesses (Reich, 1927). Even though sexuality is a risky and delicate field of research, precisely because of the major implications of social and religious control, medicine has repeatedly emphasised the importance of a satisfying sexual life for the maintenance of the individual's psychophysical health, as emphasised by the World Health Organisation's statement with which we opened the book. Even the various psychotherapeutic orientations, while participating in this general climate of little theorising about sexuality – with a few exceptions such as Kaplan (1974) – are, however, in agreement about its importance for the mental health of the individual, the couple and society. Even outside Western culture, ancient Chinese and Indian philosophies such as the Tao and tantra yoga have made specific recourse to sexuality in meditative practices not only for bodily well-being, but in particular for the elevation of the spirit.

Let us now see how sexuality is influencing our current culture and how culture influences sexual experiences.