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Lacanian Insights into Atypical Sexual Identity

French theory permeates the literary and intellectual world, and a thorough understanding of certain contemporary fields within French theory must include the linguistic and psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan. Lacanian insights into language and psychoanalysis are foundational to several subjects, including psychoanalysis, philosophy and queer theory. French feminism, in particular, has developed as a result of, and in response to, Lacanian psychoanalysis. Post-Lacanian psychoanalysts and feminists Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Judith Butler have established their individual branches of feminism, in part, as a response to Lacan's phallogocentric order and his neo-Freudian conception of psychoanalysis.

Lacan's predecessor, Ferdinand de Saussure the father of structuralist semiotics, understood language as a system of signs, each consisting of a signifier and a signified. A signifier is an arbitrary sound such as "woman." The sound is different in other languages. In French the sound is "femme," but the arbitrary nature of the signifier is

irrelevant to what Saussure understands as the ultimate signified, which is the concept or mental image of Woman. According to Saussure, all of these arbitrary linguistic signifiers are referencing that same signified. Ultimately, through a complex system of relations, these linguistic signals make up a system of signifiers that stand in differential relation to one another. Lacan rejects this original understanding and instead posits that any singular signified is essentially just another signifier. Meaning that any image could signify a sound or vice versa; concepts become signifiers and constitute a system of their own.

In contrast to Saussure's theory, Lacan posits that signifiers have no absolute signified. Lacan understands language without a terminal point of "captation." This model of signification assumes that signifiers can only be ascribed meaning through their relationship with the other signifiers in the system. The signifier "woman" or "*femme*" only has meaning in relation to other signifiers such as "man" or "*homme*," or "child" or "*enfant*." Woman is only woman because of its oppositional relation to other signifiers like "man," etc. Without the Saussurian conception of the sign, meaning for any signifier can only be deferred to other signifiers, resulting in an infinite deferral of meaning. Lacan argues that this has a psychoanalytic function, and he incorporates his post-structuralist understanding of language into his psychoanalytic theory.

Lacan's conception of the relationship between signifiers lies at the base of his linguistic and psychoanalytic theory. His psychoanalytic theory attempts to remedy problems that are, as far as Lacan is concerned, born as a consequence of the symbolic

system of language. He believes that this system carries with it a fantasy, a fantasy that is part of what he describes as the realm of images. This realm is composed of both images that can actually be seen and images that individuals create within the imagination. In the realm of fantasy, one finds the illusory signified, a pure signified from which all things hope to garner definitive meaning. In psychoanalysis, this is often understood as the phallus, or the master signifier.

Lacan builds his post-structuralist theory through an understanding of Freud's Oedipus complex, within which the phallus plays a central role. The Freudian model is based upon male psychology and the development of the male child who has a natural incestuous desire for the mother. This desire is never articulated as such, as it is unconscious, but it motivates and drives the child in his relationship with the maternal figure. The child wants to be the object of desire for the mother; he wants to be the phallus. What the child eventually finds is that there is an 'other' preventing the satisfaction of his desire. This prohibition is the prohibition of the father.

The complex takes place during the development of the child's linguistic acquisition, and also coincides with the child's realization of the anatomical differences between boys and girls. The fantasy of castration by the father assumes a pivotal role in Freudian theory. In the fantasy of the child, a girl is a castrated boy. The girl is lacking, and this makes her inferior to the boy. Freudian orthodoxy attributes feminine penis envy and male castration anxiety to this realization.

The child's fear that the father will discover his desire for the mother contributes

to his castration anxiety. Only when the child internalizes the image of the father and sublimates it for his desire for the mother does he resolve the Oedipus complex. After resolution, the father is established as the child's ego ideal, and is internalized as the image of authority not only within his family, but the authority of society as a whole. The prohibitions presented by society are analogous to the prohibitions of the father and the child assumes them as such. During this time, the child is also learning to adopt the standard set of social expectations that relate to behavior. These expectations extend much farther than the father's prohibition of maternal incest. Once the complex is resolved, the child develops into a perfectly adjusted individual, a mature man in society, who will have children and a wife, and this process is allowed to repeat indefinitely.

According to Lacan, the symbolic order is attached with any notion of law. This law is analogous with the father and includes linguistic laws. The social laws and norms of the father are embedded within the laws of language, and once the child internalizes these laws, instead of being threatened by them, he resolves the complex. In a break from Freudian orthodoxy, Lacan did not focus on the biological aspects of Freud. He instead developed his theory in relation to language and society, which distanced him from the rest of the Freudian community. In spite of that ostracism, the Lacanian interpretation of Freud gained wide popularity within French intellectual circles. He gave private lectures at St. Anne's Church in Paris in the sixties and early seventies, which were attended by major figures within French Theory such as Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida.

In *The Mirror Stage*, Lacan develops his theory concerning the formation of the superego, or the ego ideal. Lacan's theory differs from the standard Freudian story in that the formation of that ego ideal happens when the child is still very young, usually less than 3 years old. This is about the time when a child starts to recognize itself in the mirror. At this point, when a mother and child stand in a mirror together, the child, still not fully in control of its body, recognizes that it is not the same thing as the mother. The child internalizes the ideal within his image and wants to become like that integrated being he sees in the mirror. Lacan posits that we form our ego ideal by means of externalization, by identifying with things external to us. The child's image in the mirror serves that purpose. This introduces what Lacan calls 'the split subject.' Our own identity as a subject is based upon a relationship to an imaginary self, one that we fantasize about. The self is an other, created by our imagination, which we envision ourselves to be.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, the child desires the love of the mother. That is, he wants to be the phallic object of the mother's desire, the complete satisfaction of desire for the mother. His requests of the mother are often indirect requests for that love, but the 'love ideal' that the child desires cannot be given. Eventually, the child comes to realize that he cannot be the ultimate phallic object of desire, because there is an Other preventing him from fulfilling that role.

The father structures the desire of the mother, and it is not merely the anatomical organ, but the authority of the father that represents the symbolic order of society. The desire of the mother is structured by a language, a set of norms, and extensive

expectations that come from society as a whole. The father is merely a stand in for what Lacan calls 'the big Other.'

At this time, the child begins to take on master signifiers in language, that structure the way the child organizes the other signifiers as they apply to its sense of self. Lacan would understand gender as a master signifier that does not refer, symbolically, to sex organs, but references a whole set of significations and associations that are not strictly determinant. There is an unspoken understanding of what 'boy' and 'girl' mean symbolically, but master signifiers, like these that we identify with, are in themselves empty. Still, they structure and order the entire system of symbols and serve as points of centrality by which all other signifiers establish their position within the system. We use these master signifiers to give ourselves a sense of identity, but they have no empirical substance. The master signifier's power is not in its ability to mean something empirically specific, but in its ability to organize and give value to other signifiers within the system.

Lacan's theory includes mention of an imaginary Other, a singular entity which is believed to have knowledge of ultimate meaning. By adults, this imaginary Other is often posited as a divine entity, and children initially understand the Other as their father. The Other masters and understands the system; it understands all absolute meaning that escapes the subject, and the subject uses the Other as a foundation that supports the perceived meaning of the infinite signifiers he or she uses. Any authority figure or institution can stand in as the Other for a subject, but it is only a stand in, as the Other

does not really exist. It is merely a figmental imaginary side effect of the symbolic order.

In certain mental disorders, this can take on a significance that disrupts a person's life. For example, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, someone suffering from psychosis is someone who sees the symbolic order itself as a façade. In psychosis, the symbolic order appears as that which the victim feels subject to. This often materializes as the CIA or the government, which are all possible stand-ins for the Other. Lacan's theories involving the symbolic order also extended into other disorders, including perversion. The pervert does not believe that the order is truly barring his desire, and feels free to fulfill the desire he has that is prohibited by that law. According to Lacan, the pervert gets the most pleasure, the greatest *jouissance*, by breaking societal laws. Men who have to the desire to cheat on their wives, pedophiles who have the desire to molest children, and teenagers who have the desire to sneak out of their house against their father's wishes all have manifest the desire of perversion, and it is the Other that they desire to defy.

Once a subject is integrated into the symbolic order, after it undergoes the mirror stage, it discovers this desire. Desire is much different than the need of a newborn baby. It develops within the symbolic order, as a result of social interaction, and it establishes what the subject should desire through a set of pre-established social values. Need becomes mediated by the order, and eventually, the subject desires the unattainable meaning of their pivotal master signifier.

When I choose to wear expensive name-brand clothes, it is not my basic need for protection and shelter that I am satisfying. I am satisfying my desire within the symbolic

system, and I am attempting to attain my ego ideal within the social order. This desire is manifest within every individual. Every subject has a picture of himself or herself within the social order. The individual's conception of the self is necessary; without it, he or she would not be able to interact with others, or even use language. These desires take shape in accordance with certain social standards, as established by the symbolic order, and the subject then fixates on signifiers themselves as objects of desire. Those signifiers are objects of desire, because they present a sense of how the subject understands himself or herself, and how he or she is viewed by others. The subject's sense of himself or herself is validated by the views of others, and this makes how the subject is viewed in the eyes of others significant, as it reinforces the subject's ego ideal.

The fantasy image of the self is unachievable, and routinely leaves the individual unhappy and disappointed. Part of Lacan's psychoanalytic treatment is to allow the subject to realize the fantastic nature of their ego ideal in order to allow them to take responsibility for their own happiness, free from illusory expectations. Once the subject understands that the object of their complete satisfaction of desire is a fantasy, they can better take control of their own happiness. Often, those undergoing psychoanalysis believe that somehow society is preventing them from fulfilling their happiness. When the subject understands that no individual can fully satiate their desire and has a thorough understanding of the fantastical nature of their desire, the patient can more easily resolve their internal conflict. The patient can begin to cope with desire and direct it in an appropriate way.

The subject begins to understand their lack of fulfillment once the imaginary nature of that desire is realized, but a specific understanding of the self must also come to fruition within the subject, one of a split subject. Lacan suggest that every individual is, and will always be, a 'split subject.' Later thinkers like Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler use Lacan's original theory as a prototype for their own individual conceptions of the subject. Kristeva's 'subject-in-process' and Judith Butler's theory of performance and the narrative developed out of a Lacanian discourse on the split subject. A thorough understanding of these theories requires an explanation of its formation.

The subject eventually realizes that it itself is not any particular fixed thing. Because, according to Lacan, there is a split between the subject that is spoken about analytically, and the subject that is speaking. This split is permanent and impenetrable. It exists between the 'I' that speaks, the subject of enunciation, and the "I" that is spoken about, the enunciated subject. Languages exemplify this split well. '*Je*,' the French word for 'I,' is the subject of enunciation. It is the active subject that performs. The contrasting word '*moi*' is the passive enunciated subject or the subject that is spoken *about*. These two expressions of the self are very different, and it is no coincidence that they have developed in language parallel to our separate and split conceptions of ourselves. But, as Judith Butler will explain later in the 21st century, the '*je*' is merely a performance of enunciation. It does not exist as a substantial entity, which we reference constantly.

What the subject really is, according to Lacan, is a 'performing of' a person. The

subject is not perpetually fixed. It is instead a performance. A performance structured by signifiers and fantasy images that compel the subject to understand itself as something completely different, that is, a unified fixed subject of language. This is a pivotal point in which French Theory and Psychoanalysis diverge from traditional analytic philosophy. Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray apply this theory of the self to their own individual philosophies of gender identity, and feminism. Their theories are based upon the Lacanian notion that a subject will always be broken and incomplete.

Through the process of psychoanalysis, the subject can realize this perpetual break between the active performer and their ego ideal. A realization of this split subject can result in the resolution of many sources of unhappiness. Once this is achieved, the subject is no longer under the illusion that the fantasy of the ego ideal is real, and they can more easily manage their performance without the constant yearning for a unified and complete *moi*.

Master signifiers within the social order play a significant part in the formation of the ego ideal. Everything from what shoes a child decides that they want to what God an individual decides to worship or not worship assists in the formation of a subject's ego ideal. These individual choices made by the performer create the unified self image that the subject develops within the *imagos*. Sexuality is one of many attributes that compose this ego ideal, and the popular discussion of sexuality would benefit from an understanding of psychoanalytic theories.

Words like 'gay' and 'straight' permeate our social order, and individuals grasp

on to them in order to construct a self-perceived unified ego. While these terms may have definitive meanings, i.e. an individual with same or opposite sex attraction, they develop extra-definitional connotations and can eventually mutate to the point that they retain no real meaning at all. Simple signifiers like these become master signifiers, points of capitulation, which harness immense power, but reference no terminal absolute.

The adjective 'gay' does not merely denote an individual with same sex attraction, but it serves as a *point de capiton* for a plethora of other signifiers like 'bad, feminine, and taboo.' 'Gay' as a signifier then becomes a master signifier that seemingly holds tremendous meaning. Upon closer inspection, one finds that the resultant signifier is empty. Signifiers like these have no transcendent absolute meaning, and though each individual is expected to understand their specific connotations, there is great power in their ambiguity. These ambiguous signifiers are often the most suggestive of a higher power that fully understands and encompasses that meaning, i.e. the Other, an Other that understands that master signifiers mean something *real*, something actual and substantive.

When master signifiers like 'gay' and 'straight' become post-oedipal phallic objects of desire within the social order, the *imagos* can have a detrimental effect on the subject. The subject, who harnesses that desire as part of their ego ideal, can suffer immense pain and depression in their yearning for the unobtainable, as many of these master signifiers can never be fully achieved. "Our object of desire (what Lacan terms the "objet petit a") is a way for us to establish coordinates for our own desire. At the heart

of desire is a misrecognition of fullness where there is really nothing but a screen for our own narcissistic projections. It is that lack at the heart of desire that ensures we continue to desire” (Felluga III).

With desire for a master signifier comes added grievance. Master signifiers are often accompanied by a posited Other which understands the intricacies of their existence that a subject cannot fully explain. This contributes to the pain endured in yearning for fulfillment, because it nourishes hope that there is some actual way to achieve that master signifier. Normative sexuality is one of the most powerful master signifiers desired by the subject. Often this desire is accompanied by an omniscient Other, specifically in societies that have developed alongside Abrahamic religions.

Sexual signifiers are a part of the subject’s life from the onset. A newborn’s pink blanket signifies femininity, and a blue one signifies masculinity. These are simple social codes within the system that individuals constantly take for granted. Thinkers like Lacan wish to bring the arbitrariness of signifiers like these to light.

There is great anxiety within a family when a young child begins to exude atypical gender performances. When a little boy develops an affinity towards playing dress up, the social order has been violated, and those who have already been assimilated into the social order feel apprehension and concern. When this unease is observed from a Lacanian standpoint, one can see that children that exude atypical gender performances have simply not yet been acclimated with that normative order. Philosophers like Lacan have revealed the arbitrary nature of the order, but nonetheless, it remains the driving

force behind our conceptions of identity and selfhood.

When a child becomes an adolescent, he or she is expected to fulfill expectations presented by the system. Some of these expectations are readily understood as such, and parents are prepared to deal with them, such as those that concern morality and hygiene, but when adolescents find that they harbor an attraction to the same gender, the system is violated, and they feel confused and alienated.

This is yet another circumstance in which the performer does not line up with the individual's ego ideal. We can attribute this to the split subject. Individuals can even act on their attractions to individuals of the same sex and still maintain that they are heterosexual. In cases like this, the performer's ego ideal is in direct conflict with his actions, and still, in the fantasy of the performer, he maintains a normative sexuality.

When the order tells an individual that he or she should not have homosexual attractions, that individual sees those attractions in a negative light. He or she develops a desire for a normative sexuality. The subject begins to yearn for an imaginary signifier, heterosexuality, which is presented by the system as an illusion. As with all signifiers, heterosexuality is meaningful only in relation to the other signifiers within the system. There is no terminal heterosexuality one can hope to achieve. The subject often turns to the Other for assistance in attaining this normative sexual desire. The Other gives the individual a false hope, and when he or she fails to attain a normative desire, it can be devastating.

This task is in vain. There is no Other that can assist an individual in attaining a

signified. Recently, there have been a multitude of teen suicides attributed to bullying on a basis of the adolescent's sexual orientation. Queer students face discrimination from their teachers, their friends, and their families every day. When an individual is told that the Other wants him to attain a specific signifier, the individual turns to that illusory Other for help. When none comes, the subject does not understand, the individual feels as though they are not pleasing the other and they turn to drastic measures. Frequently, queer individuals end up lying about their desires and miming normative sexual behavior. This leads to terrible relationships and painful realizations once an individual decides to forgo his deception and act on his desire.

Without this background knowledge in Lacanian psychoanalysis, the individual does not see the arbitrary nature of sexuality, and also fails to see the fantasy of the Other. He will not understand the illusory nature of his ego ideal, and he will succumb to the violence perpetrated by the system. Lacanian psychoanalysis has much to offer distressed individuals in situations like these, and could help to prevent the sometimes-terrible effects that the system can have on individuals who desire normative sexuality, or are in denial about their attractions. Those who harass and discriminate others because of their atypical sexual attractions would also benefit from Lacan's insights into the human condition.

Works Cited

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