

On the psychodynamics of collecting¹

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(Final version accepted 22 February 2005)

The urge to collect is a ubiquitous phenomenon which has anthropological, sociobiological and individual psychodynamic roots, but occurs far more frequently among men than women. The author examines the reasons for this gender difference and defines systematic collecting to distinguish it from addictive, obsessive and messy collecting, and from related phenomena such as perversion. The mode of collecting and choice of object are important indicators as to the unconscious psychodynamics of a collector and offer opportunity to describe his structural level. Collecting ranges across a broad spectrum, from an ego-syntonic integrated mode, i.e. sublimation, to a neurotic defence against pre-oedipal or oedipal traumas and conflicts. Alongside this drive-theoretical approach, object and Kleinian theory are also applied to the understanding of collecting. Collecting represents a specific form of object relating and way of handling primary loss trauma, which is different from addiction, compulsion, or perversion. Under certain circumstances collecting can also result in a successful Gestalt or way of life. The paper concludes with a case study showing how collecting develops from a pre-oedipal to a more integrated oedipal mode during the course of the analysis, which is reflected in changes in the transference.

Keywords: collecting, ego-syntonic, ego-dystonic, gender differences, sublimation, perversion, addiction, compulsion, messy syndrome, defence mechanisms

Introduction

It is known that Freud was a passionate collector of Roman, Greek and, albeit less so, Egyptian antiquities, and by 1933 he owned almost 3000 pieces, as Doolittle (1956, p. 57) describes. And yet, despite the real-life example given by the founding father of psychoanalysis, there are few psychoanalytic studies on collecting beyond those of Menninger (1942), Weiner (1966), Gedo (1992) and Muensterberger (1994). Is collecting so natural an act that the phenomenon is not worth being investigated by psychoanalysts? Freud himself refused to open up his own passionate hobby of collecting to systematic and detailed analysis. The few hints he gives on the topic stem predominantly from a time before he had started collecting (Marinelli, 2001, p. 18). In 1895, he states in a letter to Fliess, ‘Every collector is a substitute for a Don Juan Tenorio’ (Masson, 1985, p. 110).

Collecting therefore is seen as a compulsive substitute mechanism, which is why, in its most consequential form, it can have no endpoint. In 1908, Freud commented, as recorded by Otto Rank, about collecting in another place: ‘The core of

¹Translated by Eva Ristl.

paranoia is the detachment of the libido from the objects (a reverse course is taken by the collector who directs his surplus libido onto the inanimate object: love of things)' (Nunberg and Federn, 1962, p. 321). As Marinelli (2001, p. 19) speculates, the reason why Freud, in 'Character and anal erotism' (1908, p. 169), only analyses the unfortunate collector of money whom he describes as possessing the three characteristics of the anal character, namely orderliness, parsimony, and obstinacy, while exempting his own collecting from analysis, was perhaps the fleeting happiness which his 'old and filthy gods', as he called his antiques, gave him. In *The psychopathology of everyday life*, Freud affords us a glimpse into this kind of happiness when he writes,

There is one misreading which I find irritating and laughable and to which I am prone whenever I walk through the streets of a strange town on my holidays. On these occasions I read every shop sign that resembles the word in any way as 'Antiquities'. This betrays the questing spirit of the collector. (1901, p. 110)

What is evoked here is the excitement of sexual adventure in a strange city, displaced on to the objects of collection and sublimated in this way.

Starting with Freud (1908), early drive-theoretical works by Jones (1919), Menninger (1942), Fenichel (1946) and later Storr (1983) put particular emphasis on the link between a child's anal erotism and collecting behaviour. According to Fenichel, 'Cupidity and collecting mania, as well as prodigality, have their correlating determinants in the infantile attitude toward feces' (p. 283). Both the fear of losing faeces and the pleasure of retaining it can be displaced, according to Fenichel, on to the hoarded objects and acted out. Abraham (1917) describes the unconscious analogy between money and libido and its relationship with objects (of collection): 'Buying objects which have only a momentary value, and passing quickly from one object to another, are symbolic gratifications of a repressed desire—that of transferring the libido in rapid succession to an unlimited number of objects' (p. 301). Abraham considers this a drive conflict between unconscious sexual wishes and the prohibiting superego, which is resolved through compromise, namely the 'expenditure of anal currency' and, one might say, the purchase of inanimate objects. For a drive-theoretical understanding of the phenomenon of collecting, Abraham's differentiation of the anal-sadistic stage into an early anal-expulsive and a later anal-retentive substage is helpful (1927, p. 425). In the former, anal erotism is connected to the expulsion of the object and the sadistic drive to its destruction. In the latter, it is linked to the retention of the object and the sadistic drive to control it. As Abraham sees it, once the anal-retentive substage is reached, an important step towards the beginning of object love is made, which, in my opinion, is of great importance as a starting point for a systematic non-destructive collecting. This approach also explains the collector's ambivalent attitude to the objects in his collection which are to be controlled, but sometimes also to be destroyed. The anal wish to possess and not part with things, as well as the serial accumulation of similar objects are modes that are sure to play an important role in all collectors. On their own, however, they do not explain the particular individual psychodynamic of any one collector. I put forward here my theories on collecting behaviour.

Definition of the term

First of all, a phenomenological definition of systematic (i.e. in the narrowest sense) collecting is necessary in order to delineate and thus separate it from similar behaviours so that an examination of the subject can be made. The author is well aware that there are no clear-cut boundaries in practice between modes of collecting on various structural levels and states of regression as detailed here. This is also the case with related phenomena like compulsion, messy syndrome, and addiction. For this study, collecting:

- 1) refers to the seeking, selecting, gathering, and storing of objects that have a subjective value for the collector, and in most cases includes some attempt at completion. The collection of intangibles such as knowledge is not considered collecting, as the object or thing is not securely available;
- 2) in a focused way is systematic (in the sense of series formation) and, as a rule, limited to a definable and delineable area or topic, respectively, which can be outlined in, for instance, auction catalogues, or through other collections;
- 3) is comprehensive and has depth, including an interest in secondary literature and background information;
- 4) tends to have an affective, passionate grasp on the person engaged in it;
- 5) is furthermore a relatively constant behaviour over time, and not just a short-term fad.

Collecting and gender

Ontogenetically, it can be observed that almost all children from a certain age are collectors. But why then is systematic collecting in adults much more frequent in men? One is also reminded here of the almost exclusive occurrence of classic perversions in the masculine gender. To illustrate, in 2002 only 5% of the 85,000 registered stamp collectors in Germany were women. At the same time, there were almost no female collectors of cameras, records or watches. Historically and nowadays, book collectors have mostly been men. I am indebted to Johann-Peter Haas for pointing out that this difference may stem from a cultural tradition. In Jewish tradition, the handing down the Torah, the book of law, from father to son is deeply ingrained, as is the exalted importance of the object 'book'. In many countries, including the USA and France, the majority of bibliophile collectors are indeed Jewish. Women, on the other hand, collect far less frequently than men. If they do collect, their collecting behaviour is generally less rigid and intense. Some female collectors continue collections started by their fathers in an attempt to identify with them. Some wives join with their husbands and they collect together. However, the examples of Irene and Peter Ludwig and Carl and Carin Vogel (Vogel, 1999) demonstrate that the initiative proceeds from the man in each case. There are of course exceptions, for example, Peggy Guggenheim, whose impressive art collection in Venice can be traced back more to her personal relationships with the artists than to her wish for a complete, representative and systematic collection.

Freud had already drawn attention to striking gender differences in collecting. In *The interpretation of dreams*, he juxtaposes female and male collectors: the

‘lonely old maid transfers her affection to animals’, whereas ‘a bachelor becomes an enthusiastic collector’ (1900, p. 177). A careful evaluation of this generalization, however, would suggest a gender difference to the effect that women place a higher value on relationships with living objects, whereas men prefer inanimate objects (of collection).

In my view, the following hypotheses may explain these gender differences: women appear to express themselves through artistic creativity and their fecundity. On average, they define themselves more often through their children, while men, however, tend to define themselves through possessions, which in turn include their collections. Men can also express themselves creatively through their collecting, as discussed below, or through other activities. Women tend to maintain their social networks in a considerably more extensive manner, investing time and energy, which men tend to spend in the closed-off universe of their collection. This corresponds to clinical findings of marked gender differences in the prevalence of serious personality disorders. Narcissistic neuroses, for instance, are more common in men, who receive up to 75% of these diagnoses (Akhtar, 2000, p. 374). Narcissistic withdrawal from relationships to one’s own self motivates collecting in men, whereby the objects of collection form extensions of their own selves. Collecting in the sense of the most primitive form of object love, the desire to possess, is perhaps also more prevalent in men, because developmentally they are not forced to give up their primary love object. They can therefore maintain a comprehensive and oftentimes anal-secretive claim of exclusive possession over the mother more easily, in contrast to women, who go through an object change from mother to father. As Gutwinski-Jeggle (2003, p. 1062) writes, the search for the love-object ‘mother’ which, on an unconscious level, has not been renounced, can be acted out in addictions, perversions, and also abusive object relationships. The substitution here is only concretistic, and not symbolic, which, as we know, would include a giving up of the drive.

Another cause for the differences in collecting between men and women can be seen in how the castration complex is being experienced. This can elucidate the special proximity of collecting to the perversions in men. In the unconscious, the object of collection can represent the phallus for the man, or, at an earlier stage of development, the phallic, omnipotent and magically endowed breast-object, which could be lost and thus must be protected, hoarded and hidden because of its greater vulnerability.

Collecting as a specific neurotic symptom

As analyses of collectors show, the presence of a passion for collecting always plays an important role in the psychodynamics of neuroses. In this context, one is reminded of people such as Walter Benjamin, Honoré de Balzac, Emperor Rudolf II, and the Englishman Sir Thomas Phillipps who with his 100,000 books and 60,000 manuscripts owned presumably the most important and extensive book collection of his time. There is always a close and mostly unconscious relationship between the concrete object of collection and an individual’s life history, a fact made clear in my final case example. The choice of object for collection, therefore, has great

meaning in the analysis of a collector. This contrasts with Muensterberger's view who proceeds on the assumption that the choice of objects to be collected is often based on a whim (1994, p. 10).

Collecting, regression and psychic structure

Collectors differ from each other in their respective psychic structure or fixations which form the regressive basis of their collecting, in addition to their corresponding needs which are displaced on to collecting and are being regressively satisfied through substitution. Any systematic collecting in the more narrow sense defined above may also lead to a secondary addiction or neurotic compulsion. In turn, the mode of collecting can, however, during the course of development, but also in the sense of a beginning object love and fusion of the drives, take on more integrated features as shown by the development described in the final case study. Any collecting is, however, according to Baudrillard (1968), an instance of an ultimately neurotic defence against a reality in which time passes in a fear-inducing, continuous and irreversible fashion until one's inevitable death. The serial accumulation of objects is meant to interrupt this passage of time and thus make it manageable ('controlled cycle'). We invest those energies and affects in the possession of collected objects which are actually meant to be put into human relationships. Baudrillard then asks whether, in the study of this powerful regulatory system of human life which collecting represents, we ought to be talking about normality or abnormality at all (p. 16). The following systematization of and differentiation between collecting behaviours does not put forward alternative models of explanation, but offers different viewpoints that help to build an overall understanding.

Non-integrated forms of collecting on the pre-oedipal stage

Collecting frequently represents the attempt to fix self and world again when they have become unstuck, as set out in the final case study, where collecting offers a way to console oneself for being left, give narcissistic validation and calm tempestuous emotions. It expresses a yearning for completeness and for a world which is to become perfectly shaped by way of the collection. By fusing with the ideal object of collection, an attempt can be made to suspend the separation from the early self-object. Behind the variety of objects collected, one can assume the search for the lost ideal object, the One, the mother. The unconscious aim here is to define and secure one's own 'ego' via concrete possessions, and to delineate oneself from others. By for instance collecting special objects, the collector equally defines himself as standing out and special. Objects of collection are here understood to be extensions of one's own self which help to maintain the illusion of narcissistic omnipotence. This neurotic mode of collecting has the ability to avert early pre-oedipal traumatizations. Similarly, the object of collection can then, like a beloved/hated partner or an analyst experienced as important, or in the same way as magical actions, take on the character of a protective phantasy and narcissistically overrated object (Wurmser, 1978, p. 160). Collecting at this structural level can, for example, also be used as a protection against the devouring, castrating woman. It is of importance, also, that

the collector, in his traumatized and helpless state, can prove to himself via active dealings with the objects in his collections that he is still able to act.

Muensterberger, an object-relations theorist, brings the pre-oedipal roots of collecting to the fore and stresses that early childhood experiences may give rise to a tendency to perform special activities in order to reduce the threatening danger of renewed traumatization and provides the injured child with a feeling of safety. He states:

Child observation shows us that the infant may look to alternative solutions for dealing with the anticipation of vulnerability, of aloneness and anxiety, and often will be looking for a tangible object like a comforter, a cushiony doll, or the proverbial security blanket to provide solace which is not, or rather was not, forthcoming. Thus, the collector, not unlike the religious believer, assigns power and value to these objects because their presence and possession seems to have a modifying—usually pleasure-giving—function in the owner's mental state. (1994, p. 9)

Viewed in this way, these objects are an effective tool for controlling fears and insecurities.

Muensterberger (p. 28) makes reference to Winnicott (1953), who describes how the small child generally transcends early abandonment by the mother with the help of transitional objects like the teddy bear, the comfort-blanket, the doll, etc. These objects, over which full control may be exerted, help the child to better cope with separation. The transitional object also allows one to forget a lost and/or unrequited love. The collector, too, can unconsciously defend against fear of loss by displacing relationship needs on to an animated object with which he does not want to part. In all forms of collecting, the collector displaces relationship needs on to an inanimate object. If, in the course of one's life, libido remains attached to the transitional object of childhood, this may become the basis for passionate collecting. It is interesting to note, for instance, that teddy bear collectors often tend to go for textile bears which show clear signs of use, i.e. the 'wear and tear of love' by previous owners (this is a reference again to the anal roots of collecting). As we can see, in all forms of collecting, the object of collection is always charged with magical thinking, too. This can be found in Freud's handling of the animated objects in his collection. It can also be seen in the example of the Melanesians' attitude towards their cult objects which are elevated to the status of supernatural powers by being charged with mana energy by their owners (Codrington, 1891). As can be seen from Freud's example, collecting does not have to be an obstacle to relating to the outside world. This is different, though, if the object of collection retains its surrogate meaning, in which case collecting becomes a material substitute for any emotional deficit of affection. An object of collection used as a transitional object makes a person more independent of his environment and provides consolation. The function of a collection object as a transitional object, however, holds one of the dangers of collecting: when collecting gets out of hand and takes on addictive features, it can lead to a schizoid and, respectively, narcissistic pathway of regression which Symington (1993, p. 36) describes as no longer opening oneself up to the living other, the *lifegiver*. Here we can recognize that collecting offers the opportunity of withdrawal from the dangers and disappointments

of human relationships with all their vulnerabilities into the world of objects over which effective control can be exerted and which do not threaten to disappear.

In extreme forms, which would have to be described as addictive collecting and no longer as systematic collecting in the narrower sense, the collector lives exclusively in the world of the objects of his desire, an eccentric recluse avoiding any and all dangerous human relationships. As in material addictions, this then represents a quite extensive surrender into the power of an inanimate object, a mechanism which Voigtel (1996, p. 715) describes as the centre of the psychodynamics in every addiction. This addictive form of collecting is characterized by its short-term ability to ward off the deficit, the repressed conflict, or trauma, respectively. Subjectively, in this case, the desire and pleasure which a new object of collection can evoke in the collector keeps getting weaker and of shorter duration. Collecting must therefore be increased in frequency and extent, so that it can continue to produce its calming effect.

Non-integrated forms of collecting on the oedipal level

An exclusively pre-oedipal approach to understanding collecting as a 'self-help mechanism through objects' is, in my opinion, too limited a view for such complex processes for it also leaves out aspects such as the tempestuous genital passions which Freud had already pointed out. Gamwell (1996), too, criticizes the claim of such an approach applying universally to all forms and expressions of collecting, independently of the personal idiosyncrasies of the collector or of that which is being collected and how it is being collected. The great range and variety of collecting makes it obvious that no single psychodynamic approach to understanding can account for all and any individual collecting (see also Belk, 1995). The origins of collecting are more intricate and as a rule also overdetermined. What is more, there are not a few collectors who may be described as psychically stable. Let me name for instance Goethe, Guggenheim and Henry Nannen (whose collection forms the central part of the art holdings of the city of Emden, Germany). All of these were collectors who were also successful and active in other areas of life. For them, collecting was only one interest among many, albeit a very important one. Muensterberger's approach, which postulates a serious early trauma in each collector and which focuses exclusively and universally on the pre-oedipal, fear-reducing character of collecting, thus cannot be applied to every collector.

Often it is the gap in the collection, the space that needs to be filled, and the oedipal hunt for and curiosity about the missing item which represent the truly pleasurable element of collecting (see e.g. Baudrillard, 1968, p. 13). Collecting can, however, also serve to ward off the oedipal threat posed by the castrating father. The feeling of being in love with the oedipal object is being displaced on to the less dangerous, elevated and idealized object of collection (see the case of the 32 year-old record collector below), which is also coveted by other collectors. It is the unique original—the painting, the first edition, the antiquity, the old timepiece—which has to be found and possessed. This desire may become so strong that the collector does not even shy away from crime in order to gain possession of the coveted object.

In one of his own case reports, which clearly shows the oedipal dimension, Muensterberger (1994, p. 270) relegates this aspect to an insignificant footnote. It is about a collector who collects rare travel books. When tracking down the objects of his passion it is important for this collector that he finds them himself and through his own efforts. True, the analysis of this behaviour revealed the collector's attempt to actively cope with early childhood fears stemming from insecurities brought about by travelling around with his parents, who were vaudeville artists, in order to produce continuity and controllability in his life. The turning point in his behaviour, though, came when the patient was 8 years old and helped his father prepare for a trip by reading a road map, and, with feelings of superiority and triumph, found a better route than him. Muensterberger comments that by taking sole responsibility for his unique collection he maintained this control and, I think, one must add, kept repeating his former oedipal triumph by his—and this is the important part—independent discoveries of new objects for his collection.

A further oedipal root of collecting is reflected in the wish of a collector to build up a larger and more potent collection than one's own father did in order to surpass him, which then may give rise to feelings of anxiety and guilt. The patient from my final case study, through his alcoholic excesses, at least temporarily ruined his career as a manager and so avoided ever really surpassing his unintellectual father, which would have been a frightening experience for him.

Only after a lengthy analysis was I able to understand the deeper oedipal dimension in a then 32 year-old patient. This analysand collected extremely rare first editions of records with soft female voices, which he frequently acquired by theft. Rapidly, his search for the pre-oedipally comforting voice of the mother of his childhood who had sung lullabies to him became clear. He was now able to actively induce those warm, consoling feelings by playing his records. During the analytic process it could be understood, through ideas he contributed, why it was especially important to him, to 'deflower' the unused, possibly still sealed 'mint condition' record and to be the first to sink the needle into its groove. In the oedipal rivalry, he could thus outdo his authoritarian father and the brothers he envied and with whom there was great competition. He displaced the feelings of guilt that came with this act on to the mode of illegal acquisition of the records through theft. His very special and comprehensive record collection, for which other collectors greatly envied him, also functioned to stabilize his self-worth, something he missed in his job. In addition, it was an important means for him to make himself autonomous, in the sense of providing his own musical entertainment, apart from the radio environment and, as he put it, the 'profane world of the CD'.

What was striking in this analysand was his archaic affect of envy, that is, to want to possess that which the preferred other has. Envy is a very important motivation for every collecting behaviour, and often points to unresolved sibling rivalry and the claim of exclusive possession over the mother. The possession of a coveted item can indeed help temporarily to compensate childlike feelings of having missed out. With the return of the repressed, the collector, more often than not, has to acknowledge that the rival does have the better objects, which he in turn now must have and must bring into his own possession.

Closely related to envy is the narcissistic aspect of collecting, as was the case with this record collector. The collector with his knowledge is deemed an expert in his self-selected cosmos of collecting. For some collectors, it is the greatest joy to be admired and envied by other collectors for knowledge, skill and for the special pieces in their collection. If collected objects have the function of narcissistic equivalents of the collector's own self, then parting with them can equal castration, a consequence that has to be avoided at all costs.

Integrated mature forms of collecting

Not all collecting is a mere gathering of things. Certain more highly integrated systematic forms of collecting undoubtedly show signs of sublimation. In this mode of collecting, oral, anal and genital drives are being desexualized, stripped of aggression and discharged by being displaced on to the collected objects. As an effect of the mechanism of sublimation, Freud describes mainly artistic activity and intellectual work. But the art collections of some well-known collectors also represent socially recognized achievements which are encouraged by public funding. In the *New introductory lectures*, Freud (1933) used this particular social valuation to characterize sublimation. In *The ego and the id* (1923), he defined it as the transformation of a sexual into a sublimated activity in the direction of external, independent objects, necessitating an interim step, namely the withdrawal of the libido on to the ego, which only then enables desexualization. The energy of the ego is a 'desexualized and sublimated energy' which can and may then be displaced on to non-sexual activities. This interim step via narcissism is, as I see it, of importance for the understanding of the various structural levels of collecting. Freud continues,

If this displaceable energy is desexualized libido, it may also be described as *sublimated* energy; for it would still retain the main purpose of Eros—that of uniting and binding—in so far as it helps towards establishing the unity, or tendency to unity, which is particularly characteristic of the ego. (1923, p. 45, original italics)

If then a collector's desexualized, libidinous energy is directed towards the objects of collection, the inherent striving of the Eros towards wholeness and union can work to create a coherent, meaningful, and aesthetic collection. This then is in itself a new work of the creative ego, which can also have a communicative relational function. As a rule, these forms of collection also have a trauma of loss at their origin. The manner in which this trauma is dealt with, however, is totally different from how it would be dealt with in, for example, addiction, where the search for a complete *Gestalt* has failed. This metatheoretical approach may help, in my view, to distinguish the integrated, sublimating collector who would rather displace desexualized energy onto objects of collection from the clearly psychopathological narcissistic collector, who uses objects of collection charged with sexualized or aggressive drive energy for narcissistic self-stabilization.

Let us briefly and schematically consider this context also from a Kleinian perspective: the non-integrated narcissistic form of collecting arises from the paranoid-schizoid position, in which the (part-)objects of collection are functionalized and charged in a projective identificatory manner in order to be controlled in the

external world. Such addictive and compulsive behaviour attempts in vain to achieve inner psychic integration, structuralization and order by way of external order(ing) and control over, as well as manipulation of, the collected objects. The integrated form of collection, in contrast, results from the depressive position and attempts to repair the lost and damaged object on a symbolic level and to make reparation for one's own destructive impulses. The latter type of collector is well aware that he will never achieve the perfect, complete collection, i.e. on an unconscious level, the actual lost object of his early life. He nevertheless succeeds in restricting the time and money he spends on his passion in his daily routines, i.e. to integrate them into his lifestyle and relationships, and is also able to draw aesthetic enjoyment and personal pleasure from his own limited collection—which he knows cannot compete with big collections like those of museums—and after 'regression in the service of the ego' via his collection to constructively attend to the demands of reality again. At this level of functioning, collecting is quantitatively speaking, as to the degree of fanaticism, limitable, with the collector being able to determine the dosage, and so does not necessarily have to end in addiction. This does not mean either, however, that collecting will at some time in the future inevitably reach an endpoint, or that it will have to stop completely. This mode of collecting, in its highest form, may result in the collection, which was earlier taken away from society, being returned to the public in the form of a foundation, while its owner renounces his exclusive narcissistic possession in turn for, of course, the gratification of social acknowledgement.

Such collecting is also directed towards one's own transitory existence. Collections can make one as immortal as the art in which the collector participates. Think of the founders of important museums like John Paul Getty, Wallraff and Guggenheim, who have indeed remained memorable through their collections. On a small scale, this motive is expressed in the often conscious hope that a collection may be passed on by inheritance, and possibly carried on, thus perpetuating the memory of the collector.

What characterizes the mature, more highly structured form of collecting, in addition to the sublimation of drive energy, is the integrated structure of the objects of collection on which it focuses, and the comprehensive character of the object relations involved. In contrast to someone like the oral-rapacious-hoarding book collector Sir Thomas Phillipps, this type of collector enjoys choosing his objects of collection with great care. He attaches importance to the way his collection as a whole is ordered and its aesthetic arrangement as an expression of his personality and values. His collecting activity is integrated into his social and professional life. The fact that he consciously accepts the limitation of his collected objects, which are appreciated despite their shortcomings and omissions, also shows that he accepts his own limitations. In the sense of object-relations theory, the inner integration of the good and bad partial self-representations of this collector is reflected in the symbolic integration of the negative and positive partial object-representations of his collection (Kernberg, 1975).

This classification of collecting behaviour into different structural levels and stages of regression does of course encompass overlap, as manifested in transitions between the various modes of collecting, and a parallel occurrence of pre-genital

and genital dynamics, just like collecting in every instance is always determined by several unconscious motives.

On the delineation of collecting from related phenomena

Collecting and obsessional neurosis

The spectrum of structurally different forms of collecting must be distinguished from related phenomena like the obsessional neuroses and the messy syndrome (Felton, 1983). These do not represent collecting. A person experiencing the messy syndrome cannot and must not give up or dispose of the objects. The ego-syntonic freedom to decide whether to keep or throw away objects is largely suspended, if though, on a conscious level, this even seems nonsensical to the person involved, yet it does not mean that extensive suffering must be present. Collecting, in turn, involves the subjective ability to select what should be collected and what not. Of course, the boundaries may be blurred, in practice. A collector does not always find it easy to throw out objects from the margins of his collection, because they might perhaps later acquire collector's value. A collector in the sense of the definition given in this paper experiences his passion for collecting as ego-syntonic, and in no way as nonsensical and strange, quite contrary, for example, to an obsessional neurotic. Besides this not always present ego-dystonic behaviour, both obsessional neurosis and the messy syndrome are characterized by the particular strength of the sadistic element of the first anal-expulsive phase in the obsessional character, which however, as Abraham describes it (1923, p. 400), is more or less paralysed due to ambivalence at the level of the drives. This inhibition explains the inability to throw away a useless object, to 'expel' it, because this would unconsciously represent an aggressive act. In his paper, Abraham explicitly refers to what was only later named the messy syndrome (p. 413), in which he emphasizes the changeover from the pleasurable retaining of the faeces, or the object, respectively, to the equally sudden, pleasurable act of expulsion or throwing out. What can be seen in mere gathering, or hoarding, is the mode of oral introjection before reaching the anal-retentive mode. A higher stage of development in dealing with inanimate objects is, then, serial accumulation of identical or similar objects, which is the basis of collecting, as Baudrillard (1968, p. 22) describes it. Collecting in a narrower sense may, however, in the course of time degenerate into either a regressive trash-accumulation syndrome or an obsessional illness. Affected in this way, such people no longer feel enriched by their obsession to collect, a fact that points to the undeniably pathological quality of their behaviour which then ceases to be narrowly classifiable as collecting.

Collecting and perversion

In some cases, objects of collection can be taken as the attempt to defend against sexual fears. Such a fetish has, according to Freud (1927, p. 152), the function of a penis substitute for the woman, which allows the man to deny her penislessness and thus ward off his castration anxiety. As concerns our topic, it is to be noted that specific erotic fetishes which are meant to explicitly enable sexuality, are only rarely found as objects of collection in the wide field of collecting in general. Baudrillard

(1968, p. 9) points out that the mode of collecting is not equivalent to sexual practice, in so far as it is not intended to still a sexual need, as is the case with the fetish. In spite of this, collecting is directed to a 'loved object' and thus enables intense reactive satisfaction.

But is collecting per se now perhaps a form of perversion? Stoller (1975) defines perversion as eroticised hate, which has its origin in the wish to damage an object. The hostility inherent in perversion takes on the shape of a phantasy of revenge which serves to transform a childhood trauma into the triumph of the adult. The trauma is hereby converted into lust, orgasm and victory. The result of the perversion is the dehumanization of sexuality. The psychodynamics of collectors I have studied, through analyses, the literature and from being personally acquainted, are not primarily determined by actions motivated by hostility or, for that matter, a dehumanized sexuality. This can be understood that, in the systematic collectors in a more narrow sense, attainment of the anal-retentive stage according to Abraham (1927) with its related origins of object love has succeeded, and a primarily destructive relationships towards one's objects, as can be observed in the anal-expulsive stage or in the perversions, respectively, recedes to the background. One could therefore theorize that, in contrast to the sexualized defence mode of the perversions, collecting is more characterized by anal defence mechanisms.

In addition, if we avail ourselves of the understanding of the perversions as formulated by Morgenthaler (1974), analogies to the spectrum of the structurally different forms of collecting are apparent. Morgenthaler holds that perversion functions as a bridging structure in the sense of a narcissistic 'filling' which fills a gap in the patient's early traumatized, non-integrated grandiose self. This prothetic complement is the result of a transformation of aggressive and sexual energies into a polymorphous structure. Without this bridging structure, the individual would perish through psychotic self-disintegration or aggressive impulsive behaviour. Morgenthaler, too, recognizes the important function of manifest sexual excitement in perversion, to temporarily bridge and thus eradicate the contradictions between the patient's illusory phantasy and reality. The excitement then changes qualitatively, by transforming sexual satisfaction into a state of wellbeing. This process temporarily stabilizes self- and object-representations. The collector's excitement when he acquires a coveted collection piece allows him to achieve a similar stabilization of self- and object-representations. For our context, it is important to note that Morgenthaler proceeds from the concept of the descending series, that is, there is no normal narcissistic development which would occur so ideally that there would not also be a more or less silent development of narcissistic microtraumas at the same time. The other extreme is made up of the serious pathological psychic defect formations, where filling the gap fails, because the disturbances in the narcissistic area leave such a big gap that repair is impossible. The perverse forms in between then appear ego-dystonic in their fragmentation and separated from other psychic structures. Between these extremes, there are all kinds of transitional phenomena, the majority of perverts being found in the middle, meaning they are quite able to establish object relationships invested with libido. An ego-syntonic sexual deviation can then be consciously integrated into one's life. In contrast, there can be impulsive

outbursts in an ego-dystonic perversion which is being denied or split off. This differentiation of Morgenthaler is reminiscent of the structurally different spectrum of collecting as displayed above. Analogously, Baudrillard (1968, p. 19) calls the mode of wanting to possess the object in collecting also a 'discrete variant of sexual perversion'.

As in the perversions, the stabilization of the self through excitement and/or the binding of narcissistic rage can also be in the foreground in non-integrated modes of collection, as the next case example shows. I agree with Morgenthaler that it is not the aim of psychoanalysis to remove collecting behaviour as a symptom, but rather to integrate it as an enrichment into life with all its object relationships.

Case example

Finally, I would like to contrast the development of a non-integrated pre-oedipal collecting behaviour with an oedipal and integrated form and the parallel development of the patient's object relationships. This analysis took 600 sessions to complete at a rate of four one-hour consultations per week.

Mr H came into analysis when he was about 40 years old, because he wanted to learn 'how relationships actually work'. He grew up as an only child in a house with his parents and paternal grandparents. His mother and his grandmother were experienced by him as very controlling and dominant women. His father in turn was said to be very fearful and shy. The patient, a haggard man of tall stature, identified with his father as to his anxiety and insecurity around women. Associated with this was his fear that he was not liked and loved if he did not perform. This extended to his love relationships. From the beginning, Mr H expressed himself in a very differentiated manner which was, however, in stark contrast to his barren inner world, his loneliness and despair which resulted from experiencing himself as unloved. Mr H's associations helped us to understand his attempt to gain a more stable male identity through his years of collecting, above all of rare political books, and through his great interest and admiration for statesmen. In the preliminary meetings, I felt compassion and the wish to help this interesting and intelligent patient move out of his mistrust and narcissistic loneliness. At the same time, I also noticed his rigid, controlling and hidden explosive side, which made me feel sceptical and uneasy.

He initially reported that he had not become involved in a love relationship for years after his adolescent self suffered a blow inflicted by the girl who was his partner at dancing lessons, but had devoted himself exclusively and with great perfectionist zeal to his career and collecting. At age 25, he got married, although he actually felt himself unable to trust another person fully. After his wife had left him because of, among other things, his extreme jealousy some years before he came to analysis, Mr H more than ever withdrew into his world of passionate collecting. He filled his spare time with visits to bookshops and flea markets, or with reading books which he bought in quantities and hoarded. Beyond this, he had no contact with other book collectors, which in my view is an important criterion as to the structural level on which a collecting mode is operating. As one reason for analysis, he expressed the fear that his search for books was threatening to become uncontrollable. After overcoming alcohol

abuse years earlier, the intensity of his collecting had further increased. Comparatively speaking, it did however represent a marked developmental progress in the quality of his object relationships. At this time, Mr H, in his bathrobe and with a cup of tea, frequently withdrew to his library to read or rearrange his collection, which had the effect of calming him down. Often he sat in my waiting room reading a book until I asked him in. The study of books gave him a feeling of safety, calm and control over his life.

During analysis, it became clear that one of the roots of his book collecting could be found in his childhood dyslexia. He grudgingly reported how his mother declared him stupid because she was disappointed with his performance at school and made sure he left school after his *mittlere Reife* (examinations taken in German schools after 11 years of study). His early identity building as an intellectual book collector had the function of a narcissistic filling for Mr H, as Morgenthaler (1974, p. 1081) describes it, enabling him to compensate for the defect of dyslexia and related feelings of injury and insufficiency which he had not worked through. But his collecting also offered a place for his aggressive impulsive outbursts, his sadistic-destructive tendencies and states of depressive emptiness with latent suicidal ideation, which thus could be integrated into his life in this way. Whenever this patient acquired a rare book, he felt grandiose and extraordinary, as if he had written it himself. In this state, he often thought about his school days with a feeling of triumph, imagining how his former classmates might be failing today. Via the book as an idealized object, Mr H tried very early on to find access to the idealized mother, with the books symbolizing for him possession of his mother. In his childhood, his mother had often read stories to him. Through reading, he could now actively induce the consoling and calming feelings of that time, while at the same time creating a large enough distance from her by the very different kinds of books he collected. One may also speculate that his dyslexia might have had something to do with an early loss of orientation around his mother's body, for which there were some indications. Mr H later on obtained his *Abitur* (examinations after 13 years of schooling) on his own initiative and successfully obtained a degree in business management. But time and again, he doubted his abilities and unconsciously tried to compensate this through the accumulation of rare books. These also reassured him that he could in fact read well. After his college degree, he advanced to a higher managerial position in a municipal authority, where he was highly regarded because of his competence and intellectual capabilities. This successful professional side existed for a long time split off from his actual experience as a false self.

In the analysis, Mr H first had me experience his very stern and sadistic handling of himself and others. Sessions would often pass in a rigid way as if following a rigid pattern. But, if he related the purchase of new books, which initially took up a lot of space, he came to life and his eyes sparkled. At the same time, he acknowledged to his chagrin that he could not go totally without living love relationships.

In the few relationships he had had so far, which would always get his complete devotion even to the detriment of his collecting, he had felt all his life that this yearning of his would make him exposed and helpless like a 'puppy'. On the one hand, I experienced his descriptions of his collecting as monotonous,

distancing and soporific, but, on the other, I was fascinated with the theoretical aspects of the topic.

During the first two years of the analysis, I often experienced myself as being controlled by the patient, who also observed me in a condescending and disparaging way. My predominant feelings were those of unease, inadequacy and paralysis. The patient registered my interpretations which at first made him fearful for a long time without displaying any affect. He 'catalogued' and evaluated them, although they did not reach him emotionally, or he entered an intellectual discourse on the accuracy of their content. When he came into the room, I often felt transfixed by his stare, which was in the same manner as a butterfly collector would assess a specimen before pinning it down, incorporating it into his collection or throwing it out. At the time, he remarked he was rarely in touch with his feelings, for instance, with his jealousy towards his girlfriend or with his former alcohol abuse. Only after a lengthy exploration of my reliability did he begin to talk about embarrassing experiences from his childhood when he was harassed by neighbours' kids and reacted with violent outbursts of temper. He himself noticed how strongly he had tried, since then, to regulate his environment via rational, logical thinking and his interest in books.

A slow and gradual change in his relationship to me and in his dealings with objects then became evident by the dreams he brought into the analysis. His initial dreams of *bare, empty rooms where he was looking for orientation and the exit* were replaced by dreams of *more lively and populated locations*. The following dream marked a transition in the quality of the transference relationship and also in his mode of collecting: *He was invited to the home of a classmate. Suddenly, however, he was in the attic of this classmate's house. They were then together looking at the furniture in this huge, lopsided attic. It was a communal attic. In the dream, despite his efforts, he did not succeed in getting to the actual apartment of his classmate.*

In relation to this dream, he remembered that other children at the time did not like to come to his house very much, as his working-class home had not been a very inviting place. He then thought of his new girlfriend with whom he had not managed to move in and furnish a joint home. The homoerotic meaning behind the image of the attic as a reversal of the cellar image became clear to me when Mr H talked about the close relationship he had with a friend of his student years. At the time, he was afraid he might be homosexual, as the people he shared accommodation with had assumed, because he was the only one who did not have a girlfriend for a long time. With this friend, he could feel, in their 'dream team', the acknowledgement, orientation and inner strength that, alone, he had often lacked. His transference at the time was clearly of a homoerotic nature, whereby aspects of idealization and a search for orientation were the dominant features. My interpretation of his dream at the time was: 'Your greatest wish to reach the other and to belong to the crowd ends in the attic before you really have a chance to be close. Perhaps you feel that with me, too, you only ever reach the antechamber'. With his great susceptibility to being hurt and his latent aggression, Mr H had actually kept me at a distance for a long time. This was confirmed in my countertransference reactions when I had to handle him with great care, for he was only willing to let me advance up to the hallway of his inner self.

Very interestingly, during the whole analysis, he never dreamed about his collecting, which I understood as the attempt not to let me enter this very important inner sanctuary. Similarly to his collecting at that time of dry, lifeless books, this dream also lets one recognize how Mr H splits off objects internally and stores them away in the attic, instead of using them to make his 'living quarters' more beautiful and comfortable. In the dream image, I also saw, however, his wish to explore his inner self where so much junk had collected together with me, in order to bring some life into it. After this session, Mr H increasingly took up old contacts from his college days. His monomaniac interest in books and collecting took up correspondingly less time and affective involvement, although they remained important for him in order to be able to withdraw, for example when his greater closeness to others or to me became too threatening.

In the further course of the analysis his relationship with his new girlfriend then produced a flood of mixed emotions through his experience of being drawn to her and then pushed away again. At the time, he tried to silently withdraw to his book collection so as not to destroy the relationship. But this very act created such unbearable tensions in him that he reached a point where he frequently had aggressive explosions. When his girlfriend really did leave him, Mr H fell into a massive crisis. In this context, I understood his accumulation of books and his reading as an attempt to tame his impulsive outbursts which had gone so far as to include death threats against her via mobile-phone text messaging. At this time, I was scared of his aggressive outbursts, but more importantly I feared possible suicidal crises. Thereafter, we intensively talked about his feelings of hurt, for instance, of having been used by her for the purpose of separating from her husband. This he was able to experience as a relief. It was striking to hear how little he could empathise with his girlfriend. When I communicated this to him, he reacted in a massively reproachful and aggressive manner, accusing me of betraying him and only taking his girlfriend's side. Initially, I felt paralysed and helpless. In the next session, I then put it to him that he wanted to intimidate me and force his view of things on me, similarly to how he had done with his playmates and was now doing with his girlfriend. After a long and thoughtful pause, he resignedly remarked that all of this, including his girlfriend, was far less understandable and accessible to him than a book. During this time Mr H, hurt and disappointed, increasingly withdrew to his book collection, which distracted him from his obsessive brooding and calmed his aggressive hurts. He was now also able to express his anger with me that I would not take away these feelings or spare him from them. Following this, he experienced increasingly more sessions as comforting and calming, just like a merging in an exclusive *tête-à-tête* with a book. Together we understood that his collection was also a refuge for him from the women he experienced as dominating and unreliable.

The initially rigid handling of his book collection, isolated from any affect, was now slowly taking on a new quality which showed traces of more pleasure and life, and I noticed that single books were gaining in shape and individuality. The mode of his collecting clearly lost some of its addictive tendency and function of narcissistic filling, and advanced more towards a living relationship. For instance, when Mr H came in one day, he theatrically placed a book on a

side table, visibly proud, in such a way that I could not avoid reading its title, *Norway does not yield* (Brandt, 1941), and, as he told me in the session, it was a book written anonymously. The title then facilitated a conversation about his concern whether it would mean capitulation or inescapable doom if he got himself involved in relationships—even the one with me in our sessions. Mr H then for the first time talked about the political theses he read about and of his work with a political party, that is, he let me participate in his collection and in his private inner space. In the collecting of particularly political books, which at that time seemed to be replaced by a more systematic reading, we recognized his ardent search for justice to resolve the injustices suffered during his childhood. In the transference he now tried to carefully get me involved in political discussions, in which I could also feel his playful and loving competitive side. I understood that Mr H wanted to trump his weak father, who only got to be a worker, with his enormous book collection and as an intellectual. This had evolved from influence of his mother, whose working-class family had initially set very high narcissistic expectations for him, which Mr H had tried to fulfil. Proceeding from his initial ‘gathering and cataloguing’ of my interpretations, Mr H could now enter into a transference that was characterized by rivalry, but also by his needs of being loved and cared for. He was able to be emotionally more available and could allow himself to be fertilized in exchanges with others.

Translations of summary.

Title.

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