

A Psychoanalyst's Perspective: AIDS and The Death Wish

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Ever since AIDS was first discovered, activists have made AIDS a human rights issue. AIDS is viewed by them as yet another way in which gays are victimized. AIDS is a result of the social oppression of gay men, a result of the social stigma attached to homosexuality, which forces gays to go underground and to engage in unsafe sexual practices. It is social discrimination against gays, they claim, that indirectly causes AIDS, since discrimination brings the low self-esteem and depression to gay men that leads to sexual acting out. People should not "blame the victim" or condemn gay men, but rather should be sympathetic to their tragic plight. So goes the gay litany.

But despite gay activist protests, professionals in various fields have pondered the fact that many gays engage in unsafe sex, knowing that it may cause them to become infected with the HIV virus. The phrase, "death wish," has emerged in this connection, as psychologists question whether some gays have an unconscious wish to die. Even some gay groups have wondered about this. However, when they wonder about it, they attribute the death wish to social oppression of gays, whereas psychologists link it to adverse conditioning (traumatic situations) in childhood.

A recent article published in NNPA, a Black news service, reported on a new phenomenon among gay men called "bug chasing." It refers to men who go online in order to invite other men who have AIDS to pass the bug onto them. According to the article, they use phrases such as "breed me," "welcome me to the brotherhood," and "convert me," as though getting AIDS were some rite of passage. The article describes a typical online advertiser, an African-American man, 34, from New Jersey who identifies himself as a "bug chaser." His screen name is "Vertical." He claims to be HIV-negative, but wants to become HIV-positive, preferably by "a down to earth, cool dude with nice thighs."

The article notes the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, has found that HIV-related illness and death has historically affected gay men more than it has any other group. "In 2000, according to the CDC, 13,562 (42 percent) of new AIDS cases were reported among men who sleep with men, compared with 8,531 (25 percent) among IDUs and 6,530 (33 percent) among men and women who acquired HIV heterosexually." In a time

when gay men are being urged to practice safe sex, bug chasers are deliberately taking part in unprotected sex in order to contract the disease.

The article goes on to quote a psychiatrist, Antoine Douaihy, who works with AIDS patients in Pittsburgh. Douaihy says that confusion, depression and mental illness contribute to what he considers self-destructive behavior. "They [bug chasers] are reaching out for some kind of intimacy. They want to feel accepted and a part of something. It's a distorted way of exploring how you can become intimate with someone else." The distortion to which Douaihy is probably referring is the bug chaser's association of intimacy with disease and death; bug chasing would seem to be an ultimate demonstration of a death wish among some gay men.

Freud* laid the foundation for a psychological theory of the "death wish"; indeed, his concept of a death instinct not only in human beings but also in all living matter is one of the cornerstones of his psychodynamic theory. However, Freud's concept is as much about biology as it is about psychology, using biological analogies to explain the death instinct. Writing about the relationship between eros and the death drive, he notes that what eros is aiming at "by every possible means is the coalescence of two germ cells which are differentiated in a particular way. If this union is not effected, the germ cell dies along with the other elements of the multicellular organism" (1920, p. 45). He sees a struggle between these opposing forces in all living matter. On one hand, there is the instinct toward sexual union and life (eros), and on the other hand there is the instinct to return to the nonliving matter from which life erupted (thanatos).

He once stated ironically that, "The aim of life is death." He explains his theory by pointing out that in the beginning there was no life on our planet. When the first living cells emerged, they were probably alive for only a moment and then quickly returned to the inanimate state. The inanimate state is the natural state of being, while life is a kind of aberration. So the moment an inanimate object comes alive, it is conflicted; part of it wants life, but part of it wants to return to its "natural" inanimate state. Speculating on the evolution of the first life to appear on our planet, he writes, "The tension which then arose in what had hitherto been an inanimate substance endeavor-

ored to cancel itself out. In this way the first instinct came into being: the instinct to return to the inanimate state" (p. 37). Still later, he uses sexual intercourse to explain the opposing forces of eros and thanatos: we seek sexual excitement (the life instinct), but when we become too excited we seek release from excitement in the form of the orgasm (the death instinct—i.e., the return to inanimate matter).

Freud went on to link this death instinct with the repetition compulsion and with masochism. To him, the repetition compulsion, as seen in dreams that conjure up a "psychical trauma of childhood," hark back to the wish to return to an inanimate state, or, in other words, to return to the womb. In explaining the connection between the death instinct and aggression he notes, "During the oral stage of the organization of the libido, the act of obtaining erotic mastery over an object coincides with that object's destruction" (p. 39).

This aspect of Freud's theory, linking the death instinct with the repetition compulsion and aggression (in the form of masochism and sadism) may shed light on the psychodynamics of those male homosexuals who would appear to have a death wish. Because of traumatic situations in

their childhood, they develop the compulsion to repeat those traumatic (usually abusive) situations in their adult lives. Often times, such gay men, as children, were sexually or physically abused, and so their sexuality as adults takes on a sadomasochistic attitude. The depression that they feel perhaps contributes to the process, causing them to have unconscious suicidal urges, which they romanticize by viewing the process of getting infected with a deadly disease almost in a Romeo and Juliet manner.

Those activists who want us to see AIDS simply as an aspect of the societal oppression of gay men, and who likewise feel that any analytical study (such as this one) is an attack on gay men, are actually preventing us from understanding and truly doing something about the problem.

*Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 1920, (New York, Bantam Books, 1967.)

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