Hysterical Personality
Evolution of a Diagnosis

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

– T.S. Eliot

Hysteria, Hysterical, Histrionic

“I have found it easier to identify with the characters who verge upon hysteria, who were frightened of life, who were desperate to reach out to another person. But these seemingly fragile people are the strong people really.”

A Starting Point in Ancient Greece
Hysteria: The Wandering Womb

• Plato
  – Desirous of procreating children and when remaining unfruitful gets discontented and angry and wandering through the body causing all varieties of disease…
• Hippocrates
  – First introduced term hysteria, a consequence of a dry womb rising to the throat searching for humidity and causing impeded breathing.
• Galen
  – Women: blocked menstrual flow and sexual abstinence
  – Men: retained sperm
Jean Martin Charcot (1825 – 1893)

- Genetic Susceptibility
- Emotional Factors
  - Hyper excitability
- Sexual Frustration

Dissociation Process
Pierre Janet
1859 - 1947

- Certain mental functions which are ordinarily integrated with other functions operate in a more compartmentalized or automatic way usually outside the sphere of conscious awareness or memory recall.
- Vulnerable patient unable to integrate painful experience into present life.
- Distorted memory of trauma and effort to assimilate it not accomplished causing exhaustion, symptoms, and more overwhelming affect.
- Field of consciousness becomes more restricted and suggestibility increases.

Studies in Hysteria 1895
Breuer, Freud, and Anna O
Freud’s Idea of “Konversion” Hysteria
1894

• Unbearable idea is rendered innocuous: libidinal energy transform to a bodily form of expression.
  – Primary gain: expression in a bodily metaphor.
  – Secondary gain: needs for attention, affection, support, freedom from “responsibility”.
  – Self-inflicted punishment to deal with guilt.

Wilhelm Reich
1897 - 1957

The Hysterical Character
1933

Coquetry in gait, look or speech
Fickleness of reactions
Strong susceptibility
Strong tendency to reactions of disappointment

Evolution of a Diagnosis

• DSM (1952)
  – Psychoneurosis
    • Conversion Reaction
    • Dissociative Reaction
• DSM II (1968) Hysterical personality
  Hysterical personality (Histrionic personality disorder) These behavior patterns are characterized by excitability, emotional instability, over-reactivity, and self-dramatization. This self-dramatization is always attention-seeking and often seductive, whether or not the patient is aware of its purpose. These personalities are also immature, self-centered, often vain, and usually dependent on others. This disorder must be differentiated from Hysterical neurosis.
Evolution of a Diagnosis

- DSM III (1987) Histrionic Personality Disorder
  - Behavior that is dramatic, reactive and intensely expressed (at least three)
    - Self-dramatization
    - Incessant drawing attention to self
    - Craving activity and excitement
    - Overreaction to minor events
    - Irrational angry outbursts, tantrums
  - Interpersonal Disturbance (at least two)
    - Perceived as shallow and lacking genuineness
    - Egocentric, self-indulgent, inconsiderate
    - Dependent, helpless, seeking reassurance
    - Prone to manipulative suicidal threats, gestures or attempts

Histrionic Personality Disorder
Five or more characteristics

- Uncomfortable in situations where not center of attention.
- Interactions characterized by inappropriately sexually seductive or provocative behavior.
- Rapidly shifting and shallow expressions of emotion.
- Physical appearance to draw attention.
- Speech impressionistic and lacking in detail.
- Self-dramatization, theatricality, exaggerated expression of emotion.
- Suggestible.
- Considers relationships more intimate than they are.

Personality Organization Model
Otto Kernberg (1975)

- Components
  - Reality Testing
  - Integrated Sense of Self and Others
  - Maturity Level of Defenses
- Levels
  - Psychotic
  - Borderline
  - Neurotic
Gabbard Differentiation
2005

Hysterical personality disorder
- Restrained and circumscribed emotionality
- Sexualized exhibitionism and need to be loved
- Good impulse control
- Subtly appealing seductiveness
- Mature triangular relationships
- Separations from love objects can be tolerated
- Strict superego and some obsessional defenses
- Sexualized transference wishes develop gradually and are viewed as unrealistic

Histrionic personality disorder
- Florid and generalized emotionality
- Greedy exhibitionism with a demanding one quality that is cold and less engaging
- Generalized impulsivity
- Crude, inappropriate and distancing seductiveness
- Aimlessness and helplessness
- Primitive, dyadic object relations characterized by clinging, masochism, and paranoia
- Overwhelming separation anxiety when abandoned by love objects
- Strong superego and predominance of primitive defenses like splitting and idealization
- Intense sexual transference developed quickly and viewed as realistic

Sociocultural Perspectives
Elaine Showalter and Feminist Theory

- Dora and Freud (1900)
  - Symptoms
    - "Petite Hysterie": cough, headache, "hysterical whisper" (aphonia), depressions.
  - Intellectual aspirations and no support.
  - Relationships with the K family: selling Dora to Herr K.
  - Dora’s desire to be believed countered by Freud’s desires to manage symptoms via predetermined method.
  - “Said farewell in the most amiable way with warm wishes for the New Year – and did not come back”

Elaine Showalter and Feminist Theory
The Female Malady

- Hysteria as a feminine protolanguage, communication through the body messages that cannot be verbalized.
- Caused by women’s oppressive social roles rather than by their bodies or psyches.
- “What woman is not Dora?” (Helene Cixous).
Male Hysterical Personality

- Similar General Characteristics
  - Seductiveness
  - Sexualization
  - Promiscuity
  - Sexual Jealousy
  - Capriciousness
  - Longing for Ideal Love
- Subtypes
  - Hypermasculine
  - Passive/effeminate

Interpersonal/Intrafamilial Conceptualization of Hysterical Personality
Mueller and Aniskiewicz (1986)

**Paternal Characteristics**
- Manifest
  - Self Absorbed
  - Demanding and Controlling
  - Seductive
  - Possessive
  - Daughter an extension of him
- Latent
  - Weak
  - Needy
  - Dependent

**Maternal Characteristics**
- Manifest
  - Ineffectual
  - Inadequate
  - Resigned to husband’s position
- Latent
  - Competitive
  - Controlling

Stage One
Unseating the Mother

- Father turns to daughter to satisfy his self-centered needs.
- Daughter becomes father’s confidante, a powerful but inappropriate role.
- Father’s disparagement of mother in front of child.
- Father undercut maternal authority.
- Father sets competition between daughter and mother.
- An alliance is set in fear and identification with aggressor, a male who is self-centered, nonsupportive, humiliating, and hostile.
Stage Two
Mother’s Resignation

- Mother recedes in the presence of an overpowering father.
- Retreats to defensive passivity and denial ("turning a blind eye")
- But frustration with husband expressed passive aggressively and further escalates his assaults on mother.
- Daughter is left vulnerable and without an ally.
- Mother projects her own thwarted self actualization and resignation onto daughter: deny, suppress, comply, be sweet, be feminine. (Think about Dora and Showalter’s views)

Stage Three
The Father – Daughter Relationship

- Daughter’s coyness and cuteness are fostered by father as a source of pleasure for himself.
- Daughter’s “seductive” behavior is a bid for nurturance and becomes “a little possession, something he could protect and shape”.
- Daughter accepts the role in exchange for security.
- Father is conflicted about daughter’s dependence. He fosters an unhealthy dependent relationship yet is repelled by dependent women. He may speak favorable of assertive women but he is easily threatened.
- Daughter is an extension of a father who demands conformity and therefore develops no sense of her own substance.

Stage Four
Puberty, Unmasking the Father

- Father condemns the very behavior he stimulated, “wanting to preserve their pleasure in their little girls”.
- When the daughter asserts her will and no longer centers in the father, she no longer bolsters his ego, he is no longer stage center – then she has broken the pact.
- Many patients recalled specific points when their fathers “stopped loving them” when her socializing attempts were converted into expression of sexual urges.
- Early affectional needs were sexualized and now emerging sexuality includes an aggressive component.
Stage Five
Mother’s Collusion in Rebinding Daughter

- At daughter’s puberty mother may become an instrument of father is trying to control the daughter’s willfulness.
- Personal insecurity fuels attempts to placate father and keep peace in the family.
- Mother’s message may be to conform and submit as she has done and thus daughter doesn’t have an ally.
- Daughter has become a pawn in parental security operations and is left feeling deceived, exploited, and with no intrinsic self-worth.

Stage Six
Attempts to Renegotiate with Parents

- Daughter seeks to have parents take responsibility for their respective roles in their own conflicts.
- From father she seeks a nondefensive and open relationship in which she can feel fully and freely and in which she feels power and substance.
- Daughter tries to mobilize mother to take responsibility for herself in relationship with father and thus provide a strong identification for her rather than one of conformity and submission.
- When such efforts are futile the hysterical personality turns outward and displaces unresolved conflicts (lack of personal integration) onto present relationships which ultimately are unfulfilling.

Contemporary Psychodynamic Formulations
Transference – Countertransference Themes
Gender, Sexuality and Power

**Male Therapist**
- Female Patient
  - Charm and captivate therapist
  - Awareness of needs behind seductiveness
- Male Patient
  - Narcissistic features
  - Competitiveness/fears of retaliation

**Female Therapist**
- Female Patient
  - May initially devalue yet want strength/substance
- Male Patient
  - Charm and captivate
  - Awareness of underlying anxiety about being a “real man”
What is the source of our first suffering? It lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak. It was born in the moment when we accumulated silent things within us.