
CLINICAL NOTES

On the Umbilicus as a Bisexual Symbol

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A middle-aged male patient is described for whom the navel was a symbol of both passive and aggressive sexual strivings and a site for sadomasochistic fantasies. Historical material is presented to support the likely use of the navel in this way and to suggest its possible universality as a bisexual symbol. The patient's use of his own navel as a bisexual symbol allowed him to play both female and male sexual roles in fantasy. By means of projection upward, his navel became a phallic equivalent, but his navel also served as the focus of fantasies of being penetrated. The entire abdominal region had become eroticized in his own body and was the focus of his interest in the bodies of potential male sexual partners. The significance of the navel in the fantasy life of male patients may be more common than has been noted by clinicians.

Only three very brief communications in the psychoanalytic literature have dealt with the psychological meaning of the navel. In one reported case (Walzer, 1974), the umbilicus served as a vagina substitute. Waltzer noted that his patient—a short, obese, “borderline psychotic” (p. 496) 48-year-old woman—did not lose weight for fear of finding a “penis-like structure” (p. 496) in her vagina, which remained inaccessible to her inspection under the folds of her “pendulous abdomen.” At the same time, by displacement upwards, her navel, which she could reach and touch and often stimulated in masturbatory rituals, was treated as though it were her vagina.

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Heilbrunn's patient was a heavy, "borderline schizophrenic" (Heilbrunn, 1975, p. 272) 27-year-old man who stimulated his navel with needles from latency on. After puberty, he masturbated while poking and prodding his navel. From prepuberty on, the patient was fascinated by protruding navels, which "eventually became associated with delight in muscular, athletically built male torsos" (1975, p. 270). In order to fashion such a navel on his own body, this young man cut or inserted a sewing needle in his periumbilical tissue in order to pull back the skin surrounding his navel and reveal it. These procedures resulted in orgasm. Heilbrunn admitted that he "did not succeed in finding an unequivocally satisfactory explanation of the preoccupation with navels" (1975, p. 271). However, he conjectured that, by way of an identification with his mother, who had a protruding navel, his patient equated "the elevated umbilicus with the penis" (p. 272). Referring to Kubie (1974), Heilbrunn hinted at the possibility that his patient's "attempts to raise his navel may have represented an innate 'unconscious drive to become both sexes'" (1975, p. 273).

In an elaboration of Kubie's (1974) observation, I would like to propose that the navel is a bisexual symbol in certain patients. When it is invaginated, the umbilicus is clearly a vagina symbol, but when it protrudes, it is phallic in nature. Therefore, the navel may be characterized as a bisexual symbol.

The omphalos or umbilicus (*umbo*) is an ancient phallic symbol. There may be some etymological connection between the Greek words *omphalos* and *phallos*. In ancient Greece, at the Delphic temple (and at an altar in Megara), the omphalos stone was taken to be the center of the earth. Used as an altar for religious celebrations, it was thought of as an *umbilicus terrae* (earth's navel).

As a symbol, the omphalos was the subject of an early study by the classicist Wilhelm Heinrich Roscher (Roscher, 1913). More recently, Gutiere Tibòn (Tibòn, 1983) and Elisabeth Bronfen (Bronfen, 1998) have considered the psychological meaning of the navel. In her examination of female hysteria, Bronfen cited Freud's image of the dream's navel, which is where its interpretative accessibility recedes into obscurity. As such, the navel stands for conundrum, inexplicability, and the nonrational. Bronfen noted that the ancients practiced omphalomancy or umbilicomancy, the divination of a person's fate based on the interpretation of the shape and folds of the person's navel. The umbilicus was also identified with the central *gnomon* of the sundial and with the germinative parts of seeds and

flowers (e.g., the rose). As an icon, its symbolic relation to both generativity (the feminine) and procreativity (the masculine) is undeniable.

Children are routinely curious about the umbilical scar and associate it with mystery, the interior of the body, and other body orifices, especially the mouth and anus. They often toy with their navel and sometimes insert objects into it. They may be observed thrusting their belly forward to proudly display the navel.

Deep periumbilical sensory nerve endings communicate with the genitourinary system, so pressure in the navel can produce indirect genital stimulation. Therefore, some children come to associate the navel with anal sensations, in particular when mothers hope to aid their children in defecating by pressing on the child's abdomen while he or she is seated on the toilet. An association may be made between the umbilical orifice and the anal opening. Given the proximity of nervous tissue, the pressure and stimulation often produce genital sensations, which are linked to anal and umbilical feelings. Children may think of individuals with protruding navels as masculine and invaginating navels as feminine. Children who have invaginating navels may assume that the protruding nub is hidden deep within their abdomen.

Adults sometimes continue the practice of playfully touching their navel, often as a masturbatory equivalent. Among men, at least since the time of King Solomon, the fantasy of a woman's navel as an erotogenic zone and vagina substitute is fairly common. More recently, it has been considered to be such a sexually arousing body part that, for a time, film makers were not permitted to show the naked female navel, which had to be covered or filled with an ornament of some kind before it could be photographed.

The navel's significance as a contemporary sexual signal is quite evident. In order to mark it as an erotogenic zone, it is current fashion to pierce the navel and adorn it with a ring or other jewelry. Also in fashion now, for both young men and women, is exposing the navel whenever possible. In popular parlance, navels are classified as "innies" (invaginated umbilicus) or "outies" (protruding umbilicus). In one form or the other, it can have feminine or masculine symbolic and erotic value.

As a structure, the navel is a scar that reminds us of our fetal connection to the mother and our mortality. It is at the epicenter of the body. As such, it is one of the weakest places in the abdominal wall. The navel symbolizes both strength and vulnerability. In the myth of Er recounted by Plato, the navel was an aesthetic embellishment thoughtfully provided by Zeus when the two sexes were first created.

The navel is the central erotogenic zone for a certain group of men, one of whom I describe. I have had the occasion to work with several men for whom fascination with the navel dominated their erotic imagination and sexual life. Typically, disguised fantasies of umbilical penetration occur often in their sexual life. They may use combat fantasies (wrestling, fighting) to express sexual desires for penetrating or being penetrated.

Case Illustration

John, a single, white, middle-aged man, had fantasized about being punched or stabbed in the navel since latency. Like Heilbrunn's (1975) patient, he was fascinated by male torsos, but since his mid-30s, he had exercised to the point that his abdominal muscles were visible. He took great pride in this, especially since as a boy and young man he had been overweight. He thought of his abdomen, rather than his genitals, as the erotic focus of his body and his navel as the focal point of his abdomen. His combat fantasy involved having his partners simulate an attack on his "stomach" or "gut," focused specifically on his navel. This sexual sado-masochist imagined that repeated attacks on his navel would gradually weaken him, and only after extended attacks did he finally exclaim, "I can't take any more of this." Alone or with a partner, this was his favorite way to reach orgasm. In his fantasy, the navel is at first the site of phallic strength, power, and dominance, but is transformed into a place of being penetrated, which he identified with weakness and defeat.

As a child and adolescent, John often lay on the floor and balanced heavy objects (like the leg of chair, a barbell) in his navel. His first experience of conscious ejaculatory orgasm occurred during one of these sessions. He sometimes imagined other men in the situation of being attacked in the navel. On one occasion, during latency, he acted out the combat fantasy with a girl, but his fantasy usually featured a male, typically one identified with strength and phallic prowess (Superman, a professional wrestler). Until late adolescence, the patient would act out these fantasies alone. Eventually, he discovered an underground network of homosexual contacts who shared his fantasy. The patient was not a practicing homosexual in the conventional sense. For example, unlike most homosexual men, he had no interest in genital contact with his male partners. He was repelled by oral sex with men, unless he was the recipient, and only rarely did he feel a desire for anal intercourse. He abhorred the idea of passive anal penetration. At the same time, he was not sexually

attracted to women. These features of the patient's sexual life would seem to mark the fantasy as pregenital in nature.

My patient's umbilical intrusions may be read as both an attempt to get at his hidden phallic navel (his umbilicus was invaginating) and to destroy it, to be both a man and a woman. During the combat fantasy scene, he transforms psychologically from man to woman. Some such transformation may be the underlying function of all repeated fantasies. When he feels aroused, he inserts a phallic object in his navel, which both makes his navel phallic and enacts self-penetration. The use of the navel as a bisexual object allows him to play both the male and female sexual roles. At the height of his fantasy, he is both the penetrating phallic male and the penetrated female, both the source of power and dominance and the attracting recipient of a phallus substitute. In the process of transformation, he has momentarily become both sexes. As both protuberance and cavity, the navel itself serves as a symbol of this duality. It may easily be understood as a symbol of what Kubie (1974) termed the "unconscious drive to become both sexes."

Discussion

The navel may be viewed as a bisexual symbol in some male patients. When it does, it may represent pregenital impulses of a sadomasochistic nature. The navel may become the site of conflicts over power and control and penetration, both active and passive. The shape of the protruding navel is phallic. Probing an invaginating navel may be construed as searching for the hidden phallic navel. My patient's fantasy often included replacing the invisible phallic navel with a physical object. The culmination of his combat fantasy is a union of the male and female elements in the patient's own body at the symbolic site of such union, the navel. The union cancels both elements, however, and the patient feels neither empowered nor fulfilled. Although the physical site of the experience is bisexual, the experience is ultimately asexual, at least for this patient, because the two sexual elements have cancelled themselves out. The patient has both won and lost the struggle he enacts in fantasy.

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