KLEPTOMANIA: A Brief Intellectual History

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Kleptomania, the uncontrollable impulse to steal items of no real sense or value to the thief, was first described in 1816 and been a controversial topic among psychiatrists, legal authorities, and retail store managers ever since. The paper presents an intellectual history of kleptomania, critically examining why ideas about it developed, were challenged, and in some cases modified over two centuries. Skeptics have derided kleptomania as an invalid psychiatric concept exploited in legal defenses of wealthy lady shoplifters. For French psychiatrists in the nineteenth century, and later for disciples of Freudian Psychoanalysis, kleptomania was a rich subject area. After nearly being dismissed as Psychoanalysis lost prestige, kleptomania has in recent decades been viewed as a serious psychiatric ailment that is more widespread than acknowledged and that disproportionately afflicts females.

What follows is an episode in the intellectual history of consumer thought, in this case thought about the extreme form of consumer misbehavior known as kleptomania—uncontrollable and irrational stealing.

Intellectual history applies critical historical reasoning and evidence to intellectual phenomena over time. Intellectual history differs from literature reviews as conventionally done in the social sciences. The former assumes change in environments and influences over time. The latter present findings over time in an ahistorical manner, as if they had all occurred in similar social, cultural, etc. environments. This is the case with the several excellent literature reviews on kleptomania that have been utilized by the authors (e.g., Aggermana 1961, Goldman 1991, Juquelier and Vinkon 1914, McElroy et al. 1995-1996, Seguier 1966).

The intellectual historian accepts that the intrinsic strength of ideas matters, as does the kind of evidence that is employed to support them—but then asks what gives an idea intrinsic strength to those exposed at a given time; and further asks what makes given evidence more or less compelling to those exposed. Over historical time the same idea may seem absurd, or inspired; the same evidence profound or trivial. Searching for explanation, the intellectual historian may find a variety of factors coming into play, some coming eerily close to

fashion cycles and unexamined acceptance of reputation. Intellectual history does not assume that change equals objective and substantive progress. Advocacy by a highly reputed thinker can assure credibility for an idea previously—and justifiably—held suspect. Hare's (1962) classic article showed how the idea that masturbation leads to insanity, advanced by an anonymous quack early in the 1700s, became credible when taken up—without medical proof—by a famous Swiss physician in mid-century, and gained yet greater credibility when repeated—without critical scrutiny—by Esquirol, the most influential psychiatrist of the early to mid nineteenth century.

Hare (1962) also shows how the masturbatory insanity hypothesis fit the intellectual Zeitgeist of the eighteenth century, when the traditional spiritual explanations for insanity had gone out of vogue and new explanations were needed.

Tourney (1967) analyzes how new psychotherapies have undergone regular cycles of introductory enthusiasm, extravagant reports of success, diminishing reports of success, and decline. Ideas advanced by French psychiatrists during the 1830s and 1840s tended to be taken very seriously because French psychiatry led the world in reputation; ideas advanced by French psychiatrists a century later were often ignored because French psychology had lost prestige and become isolated from the main intellectual currents in the field. (See Berrios 1985, p.168; Mora 1972).

Again, writers and thinkers can make conscious efforts to advance their concepts as a way of enhancing their own societal importance, as has been the case with some market economists in recent decades. The conscious efforts are proselytizing pure and simple. Goldstein (2001) shows how French psychiatrists in the first half of the nineteenth century strove to advance their profession's public importance by active participation in court cases.

All of the above factors will be encountered in our intellectual history of kleptomania.

KLEPTOMANIA IN NINETEENTH CENTURY PSYCHIATRY

In 1816 the Swiss physician Mathey, who worked with the insane, wrote of "a unique madness characterized by the tendency to steal without motive and without
necessity. The tendency to steal is permanent. ...Reason ... resists this secret compulsion; but the thieving tendency triumphs, it subjugates the will" (Mathey 1816, quoted in Juquerel and Vinchon 1914, p. 50 and Segui 1966, p. 337). Mathey termed this madness "kleptomania," stealing insanity. Two decades later the French physician Marc introduced the term "kleptomania," which also means stealing insanity (Marc 1840).

Both Mathey and Marc described the phenomenon as characterized by:

Irresistible impulses to steal objects of trivial value and which made no economic sense for the thief. (The stolen objects were often immediately discarded.)

A sense of exhilaration and relief of tension triggered by the acts of theft.

Being found more often among females.

Their examples suggested that kleptomania particularly affected people of high social and economic status, including European royalty. Above all, it afflicted socially distinguished ladies, as in this example by Marc and the famous psychiatrist Esquirol:

A woman of fifty years, happily married, mother of two young ladies and a son of eighteen, belonging to an honorable family and previously of irreproachable conduct, known for her generosity and beneficence, ...arrived in Paris and committed larcenies in several retail shops. ...

[She confided that] "I have a crazed envy that drives me to take possession of all that I see, such that if I had been in a church I would not have been able to resist stealing from the altar." (Marc and Esquirol 1838).

Aside from the implication that kleptomania is most common among social elites, the definition of kleptomania given by Mathey and Marc is essentially that given today in the authoritative Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (McElroy et al. 1991). The basic definition has been used for the past two centuries, as is apparent in Exhibit 1. Over time psychiatrists have disagreed on what causes kleptomania, how to treat it, and how common it is; they have not disagreed on what it is.

**EXHIBIT 1: Definitions of Kleptomania, 1816-2000**

**Mathey 1816: A unique madness characterized by the tendency to steal without motive and without necessity. The tendency to steal is permanent and is not at all accompanied by mental alienation; reason preserves its domain, it resists this secret compulsion; but the thieving tendency triumphs, it subjugates the will.**

**Marc 1840: A conscious urge to steal occurring in an individual in whom there is no ordinary disturbance of consciousness. The individual frequently strives against this urge, but by its nature it is irresistible.**

Marcy 1858, quoted in Segui 1966, p. 342: A sick (maladaptive) propensity to steal: the trivial value of the objects stole, the bizarre choice [of things to steal], the way in which the thief is done, the social position of the individual thieves, their morality, their antecedents from the point of view of heredity or mental state, the spontaneous confessions of theft or restitution of the stolen objects, the state of being pregnant, and finally the physical phenomena that accompany instinctive monomania: all these ought to be taken into consideration in the often delicate diagnosis of the instinctive stealing monomania.

**Crosby 1879, pp. 160, 158: Kleptomania, the propensity to steal, is a very common form of moral insanity. The acts of theft are often of the most unreasonable character. ...A man...feels an irresistible temptation. His affections are perverted or his will is helpless. He is morally insane. ...[He] acts irrationally upon his own view of facts. He steals articles which he knows to be of no value.**

**Lunier 1879, p. 211: True kleptomania is a distinctive delirium defined by an irresistible impulse/compulsion to commit theft.**

**Gross 1907, quoted in Stekel 1924 p. 268: The ordinary motives for larceny are either absent or wholly disproportionate to the risk incurred;...the deeds are committed usually under the control of an irresistible impulse which asserts itself more or less suddenly and is accompanied by a certain change in the state of consciousness.**

**Friedemann 1930 (p. 454): In its purest form an impulsive act—that is, a genuinely instinctive act—the chief goal being not the acquisition of the stolen object but the satisfaction of a repressed urge. Therefore, kleptomaia (sic) represents an eruption of repressed material from the unconscious ... It is symbolic in character; i.e., the apparent rational act signifies quite another element than that objectively expressed by the act. ...The long well known characteristics of kleptomaia—the absurdity of the act, the contrast with the social sphere of the perpetrator—the heightened emotional state, are to be understood as arising from its symbolic character.**

**Lawrence 1942, p. 83: An irresistible impulse to steal without any real desire for the thing stolen.**
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Davidson 1956, p. 326: A compulsion to steal, which the patient tries to resist, but which he feels compelled to yield to because of mounting tension.

McElroy, Keck, and Phillips 1995-1996, p. 15: Kleptomania, like other impulse control disorders, has many impulsive features. The stealing may be done abruptly, without premeditation or full consideration of the likelihood of apprehension. ... Kleptomania, however, also has compulsive features: it is a repetitive behavior sometimes performed to neutralize discomfort; it is experienced as irresistible, uncontrollable, and/or compelling. ...

DSM-IV-TR 2000, p. 667: The essential feature of kleptomania is the recurrent failure to resist impulses to steal items even though the items are not needed for personal use or for their monetary value. The individual experiences a rising subjective sense of tension before the theft, and feels pleasure, gratification or relief when committing the theft. The objects are stolen despite the fact that they are of little use to the individual, who could have afforded to pay for them, and often gives them away or discards them. Occasionally the individual may hoard the stolen objects. Individuals with kleptomania are aware that the act is wrong and senseless.

The Kleptomania Concept Takes Hold

Both Mathewy and Marc had been students of Etienne Esquirol, who was the most influential alienist (psychiatrist) of the first half of the nineteenth century, whose work was avidly studied in the USA as well as in the Western European countries (Ackerknecht 1959 Chapter 6; Mora 1972). Esquirol was the leader of the French school of psychiatry, whose focus on clear and thorough observation of people confined for insanity had gained wide international respect. Esquirol himself wrote on kleptomania. He declared it to be a "monomania that resides in a lesion of the will to resist (Marc and Esquirol 1838)." Monomania was a concept that Esquirol had devised to describe delirium that was confined to one area of behavior; aside from that one area monomaniacs "think, reason, and act like other men" (Quoted in de Saussure 1946).

Development, Debate, and Doubt

Kleptomania became an active topic in 19th century psychiatry. Some reported kleptomaniacs stole from friends, family members, and employers. Most, however, shoplifted in retail stores—hardly surprising in the vigorous consumer societies that were developing in Western Europe and North America (Bucknill 1963). Abelson (1989) shows how thoroughly the awareness of kleptomania had been spread into society at large by newspapers and magazines. By 1900 the phrase "department store kleptomania" was commonly used in Europe and North America.

There were skeptics, however. Some questioned whether kleptomania was a coherent psychiatric phenomenon and not a hodgepodge. Esquirol's notion of "monomania" became controversial—even his German student Damerow (1844) had doubts about it—and lost credibility among the most progressive alienists after 1850. In 1858 the well-known alienist Marc commented on the difficulty involved in clearly diagnosing a case of kleptomania, but also gave superb guidelines that are shown here in Exhibit 1. Sir John Charles Bucknill, the Lord Chancellor's Visitor in Lunacy in Great Britain from 1862-1876, argued that writers had "mixed up a sad jumble" of fundamentally disparate cases into their one description of kleptomania (Bucknill 1863). Further, he argued, authorities kept re-circulating a few old cases as evidence for the prevalence of kleptomaniacs. Bucknill decried the widespread belief that kleptomaniacs were legion.

The Kleptomania Defense in Legal Proceedings

Further skepticism came from the use of a kleptomania defense in court trials of socially prominent ladies. Since the 1830s alienists including Esquirol himself had aggressively courted, and received, an active role in legal defenses of upper class women accused of shoplifting, especially in department stores. Some trials received enormous journalistic coverage. In addition to fighting for justice for unfortunates, the alienists were consciously advancing their own social importance. If their patients' actions were found due to moral insanity, degrading legal sentences could be avoided. Skeptics derided kleptomania as a pretext to pamper self-indulgent socially prominent women who knew very well what they were doing (Bucknill 1863, Leppmann 1901). Was frequent use of the kleptomania defense a threat to the moral foundations of society, which, like the legal foundations, were based on assumptions of individual rationality and accountability? Even among alienists there was concern (e.g., Damerow 1844). From the legal perspective Browne (1871) argued that moral maniacs do exist but should nevertheless be punished legally.

Worries about abuse of kleptomania defenses doubtless contributed to a growing tendency among alienists to restrict diagnoses of true kleptomania to incontrovertible imbeciles, as evidenced in the work by Lasegue (1880) and Boissier (1894) shown in Table 1. Alienists had from the beginning described cases of male and of lower class kleptomaniacs, but this evidence made no headway against the highly dramatic stereotype of the socially prominent thieving lady.
TABLE 1:
Causes/Contributing Factors to Kleptomania by Date

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marc and Esquirol 1838</td>
<td>Lesion of the will</td>
<td>Alexander 1923</td>
<td>Penis envy and Fear of Castration</td>
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<td>Esquirol 1845</td>
<td>Hysteria, Epilepsy, Menstruation, Stupidity, and Self-Love</td>
<td>Aggernaes 1961</td>
<td>&quot;Great and unsatisfied need of human contact,&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Damerow 1844</td>
<td>Depression, Epilepsy, Moral Weakness</td>
<td>Fishbain 1987</td>
<td>Risk-taking to Combat Depression And Sexual Frustration.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lasegue 1880</td>
<td>Cerebral defects, Epilepsy, Imbecility</td>
<td>Khan and Martin 1977</td>
<td>Degenerative brain disease</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boissier 1894</td>
<td>Inherited mental degeneracy</td>
<td>Gudjonson 1987</td>
<td>Low self-esteem, frustration, depression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lacassagne 1895</td>
<td>Department store atmospherics</td>
<td>McElroy et.al. 1991</td>
<td>Eating control disorders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dubuisson 1901</td>
<td>Hysteria, Cerebral infirmities, Department store atmospherics</td>
<td>McElroy et.al. 1995/1996</td>
<td>Impulse control disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorders.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dupuoy 1905</td>
<td>Hysteria, Department store atmospherics, Sexual emotions, Menstruation, Menopause.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gross 1907</td>
<td>Thrill of the Forbidden</td>
<td>Durst et.al. 2001</td>
<td>Dysfunction of central nervous system neurotransmitters</td>
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<td>Janet 1911</td>
<td>Depression</td>
<td>Grant and Kim 2002</td>
<td>Neglectful parenting</td>
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<td>Stekel 1911, 1924</td>
<td>Unfulfilled sexuality</td>
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<td>Strasser 1914</td>
<td>Compensate for Inferiority Feelings</td>
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Department Store Kleptomania

As increasingly spectacular department stores opened in Paris, London, New York, and other cities—a phenomenon dramatically depicted in Emile Zola’s 1883 novel Au Bonheur des Dames (Ladies Delight)—it became increasingly common to attribute kleptomania to the intoxicating atmosphere of the great department stores (Abelson 1989; Miller 1981). Zola (1884 [1957], p. 395) described a department store display of lace so enticing that "the temptation was acute, it gave rise to an insane wave of desire which unhinged every woman" Dubuisson’s (1901) classic study of over one hundred Parisian department store kleptomaniacs included many stories like that of Madame G:

She had been arrested on September 3rd at 7:00 PM in Printemps [department store]... having concealed under her garments a silk garment [etc.]. ...A search of her home revealed large quantity of other stolen goods, all unused and with their price tags still on. The list, which is rather long, included five pairs of boots, twenty two pieces of wool and silk, two dozen handkerchiefs, fifty pairs of black stockings, thirty three pairs of colored stockings, etc., etc.

... Now 49,... [she had stolen earlier in life but was virtually incarcerated by her husband for fifteen years before this latest burst of thieving. When he loosened the bounds she went to Printemps one day and again shoplifted]
...This first theft was for her the beginning of a new existence. She was transformed. Her household, her husband, took second priority, and she had but one overriding thought, to return to the department store to shoplift. (Source: Dubuisson 1901, pp. 358, 360)

Although such accounts made dramatic reading they were not critically convincing. They also intensified some of the lingering skepticism about the reality of kleptomania.

Explaining Kleptomania—a Problem Area

The prestige of nineteenth century French psychiatry was based on its use of careful observation (Ackerknecht 1959). Its capacity to explain abnormal behavior, however, was constrained by its very approach, which avoided extensive theorizing. By 1900 a large body of case material on kleptomania had been developed, but explanation lagged. An essential characteristic of kleptomania from the earliest descriptions, for example, was that the choice of objects stolen made no rational sense; they were useless to the thief, they were often cheap items, and they were seldom unwrapped or used. How could this be explained? Nineteenth century authorities had advanced a variety of contributing factors to kleptomania; these are presented in Table 1. None were satisfying explanations for the choices of theft objects. At best, hysteria, immobility, cerebral defects, menopause and the like might explain nonsensical behavior in general. The intoxicating power of department store displays could not explain why useless and irrational objects were stolen.

Ironically, French as well as German alienists had made observations that later became central to psychoanalytic explanations of kleptomania. Several had noted that infants have a natural tendency to take whatever they want, whenever they want it (Juquier and Vinchon 1914, pp. 52-53). Several alienists had commented upon the strong connection between sexuality and overpowering urges to steal (Solsma 1955, p. 174). The nineteenth century observations, however, were not linked and used to construct theory.

**ENTER THE PSYCHOANALYSTS, 1906-1924**

In the opening decades of the twentieth century French psychiatrists more and more concluded that kleptomania was more a legal excuse for self-indulgent haut bourgeois ladies than a valid psychiatric aliment (Antheaume 1925; Friedmann 1930). French psychiatry, however, was increasingly removed from the mainstream and no longer had international influence. The Germans and Austrians had moved to the fore.

**Sigmund Freud**

The founder and guiding genius of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) aspired to explain the underlying dynamics of human behavior—to develop a “depth” psychology whose dynamics he found in powerful moral impulses previously associated with uncivilized savages—impulses to unbridled sexuality and domination. In most people the impulses were curbed (but never eradicated) by inhibitions necessary for social life; in the neurotic they were not. For Freud, human behavior was seldom rational. He was active until just before his death, creating a large theoretical corpus which his disciples applied to such psychological problems as kleptomania.

**Wilhelm Stekel**

Among the psychiatrists who met at Freud’s Vienna house in the early 1900s were Wilhelm Stekel (1868-1940) and Alfred Adler (1870-1937). Stekel followed Freud’s suggestion to read the case of a female kleptomaniac who was driven by suppressed sexual urges to take hold of “something forbidden, secretly”—this something of course being a substitute for a penis. Stekel concluded that kleptomania was “suppressed and superceded sexual desire carried out through the medium of a symbol or symbolic action. Every compulsion in psychic life is brought about by suppression” (Stekel 1911, p. 241).

Acts of kleptomania, according to Stekel, were symbolic behavioral expressions of disturbed mental states that arose from frustrated sexual desires. One had to understand the symbolic meaning of the objects that were shoplifted. A shoplifted pencil represented a penis, an umbrella male erection, a glove a condom, a music box female genitalia, and so forth. The directness of Stekel’s work, as well as the accessible way in which he wrote, helped assure that his interpretation of kleptomania influenced thinking for decades.

**The Quintessence of Kleptomania**

Laughable as Stekel’s symbolic explanations may seem today, at the time they offered a solution to the long-obscure reasons why kleptomaniacs stole ridiculous objects. No one before or since has captured the intensity of kleptomania as well as Stekel did in 1924 (Stekel 1924, p. 258):

The kleptomaniac (sic) at work is in the midst of an emotional spree. ...He is restless, tortured by feelings of anxiety, he feels that something is about to happen, ...he needs an explosion,... he must get rid of that emotional tension by doing
something...[He] may figure out the chances of success in advance, he may sometimes proceed with great caution. But the act is always carried out in a dreamy state of mind which precludes any judgment. ...The world with its proscriptions, its laws and punishments, sinks beyond the pale of consciousness and the wish or craving to act out the overpowering, overwhelming solitary impulse alone holds sway.

Alfred Adler and the Inferiority Complex

To Adler, the strong unconscious urges that drove neurotic behavior such as kleptomania arose from the neurotic’s deep feelings of physical and social inferiority rather than from sexual urges and frustrations. The kleptomaniac sought to combat his/her inferiority feelings through acts of symbolic domineering. Self-aggrandizement rather than the sexual pleasure principle drove the kleptomaniac’s shoplifting.

THE SECOND GENERATION OF PSYCHOANALYSTS

A richer psychoanalytic interpretation of kleptomania was advanced by the second generation of psychoanalytic writers, who began work during the 1920s.

Fritz Wittels

Fritz Wittels argued that kleptomaniacs were sexually underdeveloped people who felt deprived of love and had little experience with human sexual relationships; stealing was their sex lives, giving them thrills so powerful that they did not want to be cured (Wittels 1929, 1942). Male kleptomaniacs were invariably effeminate or homosexual.

Penis Envy and the Castration Complex

Franz Alexander, Otto Fenichel, and Sandor Rado explained how such phenomena as the Castration Complex, the Oedipus Complex, and Penis Envy fired kleptomania.

Freud’s teaching about early childhood development profoundly influenced them. Briefly, the infant undergoes a series of shocks, first in leaving the warm protective comfort of its mother’s womb with its warmth and ever-present umbilical supply of nourishment, somewhat later as it is weaned from its mother’s breast, and then still later as it is made to give up its feces during toilet training. The kleptomaniac never recovers from these losses, remains fixed at an infantile stage of emotional development, and feels overpowering urges to steal items which symbolically represent feces, mother’s milk, a penis, even the mother’s body (Alexander 1923; Fenichel 1933). According to Fenichel (1933, p. 577):

The kleptomaniac (sic) is fixed to a definite infantile attitude: he responds to the frustrations of his desire to be loved with hostility and defiance, saying as it were, “If you don’t give it to me, I have to take it”. The Oedipus complex seems to be formed according to the following plan: “Mother (or father) will not gratify my wishes; I myself have to gratify them.” ... [In cases of] oral fixation and a partial regression to the oral level, ...anticipation (corroborated by analysis) would be that the property stolen by the kleptomaniac symbolically represents milk, or the breast. But ...the kleptomaniac craving may more probably be the regressive expression of a desire for objects corresponding to a higher level of organization: faeces (sic), penis, or child. These three...may be supposed to be in the mother’s body, so that the theft [means] “I wish to seize the contents of my mother’s body.”

Here the symbolism of shoplifting was obviously more difficult to decipher than in Stekel’s examples. Depending upon the analyst, almost any shoplifted object could or could not represent milk, feces, the womb, the father’s penis, the mother’s body—or all of them. Such symbolism could encompass more shoplifted objects than Stekel’s, but at the same time could appear to the non-initiate as convoluted mumbo-jumbo.

Penis Envy

Psychoanalytic writers believed that female kleptomaniacs were driven not only by frustrated sexuality but also by envy at not possessing a penis. “Since she has not this penis...she resolves to steal one” (Fenichel 1933 p. 578). Bonaparte (1929) explained how a woman’s continual theft of a brand of soap used by her father allowed her revenge because in stealing the soap she was, symbolically, getting control of his penis.

The Female Castration Complex

The thought of castration, the terror it evoked, was believed to underlie much neurotic behavior among males. A majority of the known kleptomaniacs were female, however. It took some years before psychoanalytical authorities could figure out how the complex could apply to women (Rado 1933, pp. 425ff.).
Freud himself provided the key: the young girl fears losing a penis that she has fantasized. Later, her initial menstrual flows terrify her because they suggest the bloody aftermath of an actual castration. Alexander (1923) explained that in both sexes the unconscious memories of the shocks of birth, weaning, and toilet training can remain as generalized anxiety about future shocks. Compulsive shoplifting was a way of combating weakness and vulnerability.

Decline of Psychoanalysis

The prestige of psychoanalytic approaches to kleptomania was at its acme from the 1930s through 1950s, especially among retail executives and the general public. When referred for treatment by courts, kleptomaniacs usually received Freudian psychotherapy. American retail executives commissioned a major psychoanalytic study (with action recommendations) by Professor Fabian Rouke (Abelson 1989). Edward's (1958) widely-circulated practitioner manual had a full chapter of psychoanalytic wisdom on kleptomania. As its influence crested, however, the psychoanalytic movement itself was running down. Psychoanalytic thinking exhibited increasing complexity but declining originality as Freud aged. The efficacy of psychotherapy was challenged (e.g. Eysenck 1957), just as Tourney's (1967) notion of cyclicality in perceptions of therapies would suggest.

Was Kleptomania Real?

Since psychoanalysis had come to underlie so much of the understanding of kleptomania, kleptomania itself became questioned as it had not been since the early twentieth century. In Abelson's (1989) view, the malady was dying a deserved death because it had been based upon a dated and degrading view of women which no reasonable person accepted anymore. A famous large-scale analysis of shoplifters in Great Britain ridiculed Stekel's notion of sexual symbolism and declared that, while one in five apprehended shoplifters was "a psychiatric case", few exhibited all of the symptoms of kleptomania (Gibbens and Prince 1961). An analogous interpretation came in Cameron's (1964) widely referenced study of shoplifters in Chicago department stores. Kleptomania was dropped from the second edition of the American Psychiatric Association's influential diagnostic manual.

"But it moves" – Persistent Reports of Kleptomania

Just as Galileo is said to have whispered "but it [the earth] moves" while agreeing aloud to a Catholic tribunal that everything in the universe except the earth moved, so researchers continued to report cases of kleptomania even as it was being declared extinct (e.g., Agernaes 1961; Kreutzer 1972; Marzagao 1972). Mendicott (1968) reported that fully eight per cent of the apprehended shoplifters he examined were true kleptomaniacs.

REVIVAL

In 1980 the third edition of the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic manual again contained an entry on kleptomania. This continued in the fourth edition, which is currently in use, and in which females are said to represent two of each three kleptomaniacs. A steady stream of work has been published since. The essence of several of the papers is shown in Table 1.

The Therapy Life Cycle Demonstrated

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, Tourney (1968) argued that therapies reflect the intellectual spirit of their times. Predictably, the in the post-1980 work on kleptomania short-term cognitive and behavior modification therapies were found effective. Freudian psychoanalysis is still used but is clearly marginal. Again predictable in light of the Zeitgeist, pharmacological treatments figure large (e.g., Durst et al. 2001). And of course co-morbidity with eating disorders is actively discussed.

New (?) Perspectives

Significant case and empirically-based conceptual articles have argued that kleptomania is much more common than previously thought and that it is more common among women because men with similar underlying problems are more prone to violence than theft (Goldman 1991; McElroy et al. 1991, 1995-1996). These ideas are new in recent history but echo those current in the mid to late nineteenth century.

IN CONCLUSION

Despite skeptics, kleptomania has been considered a real form of consumer misbehavior for nearly two centuries. The basic definition laid down in 1816 still holds today. As shown, however, kleptomania has been loudly declared dead twice, once in France in the early twentieth century and then across the Western world after Freudian influence went out of vogue during the 1960s. Over time, there have been serious disagreements on how many true kleptomaniacs actually exist and on what contributes to kleptomania. At present
we are in the second period when respected authorities have declared kleptomania to afflict more than the three to eight percent of apprehended shoplifters given as the accepted range for decades. Ironically, the assertions of high frequency are being made at a time when rational choice dogma suffuses much thought in social science and forensic science.

Intellectual fashion cycles and force-of-personality influences have repeatedly shaped perception of kleptomania. Without Esquirol’s prestige it may never have become established as a reality; without the explanatory theoretical work of Freud and his disciples it would likely have died out in the early decades of the twentieth century. Has there been progress over time? The authors themselves cannot always agree. Some of the causes and contributing factors have been advanced so long, in so many different settings, by authorities with such different outlooks, that they can be said have withstood “the test of time”: brain deterioration/imbecility, sexuality, depression, and miserable childhood experience. Other causes were asserted with great certainty but proved of fleeting credibility.

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