

**The Relevance of Sexual Differentiation of Behavior For  
Understanding Perversion**

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. In order to consider whether we may be all be “ perverse” we must first understand sex differences in perversion pornography and sexual violence . Most paraphiliac patients are men, and men consume pornography more frequently than women. They are also more sexually violent. Understanding this requires a developmental paradigm different from any suggested by Freud, or subsequent psychoanalysts.

The proposed paradigm, begins with the *sexual differentiation of behavior* , a 20<sup>th</sup> century discovery whose full significance has yet to penetrate psychoanalytic theory and psychotherapeutic practice. (Young, Goy and Phoenix 1965)

This article is in 2 parts- first an extra- psychoanalytic discussion of the sexual differentiation of behavior, then some thoughts about how this shapes our understanding of deviancy.

## **Sexual Differentiation of Behavior**

During the first trimester of pregnancy the fetal testes begin to synthesize and secrete testosterone if the embryo is male. If the embryo is female no testosterone is secreted.

Prenatal testosterone influences the appearance of the genitals and also the structure and function of the brain . If no testosterone is secreted prenatally, the embryo differentiates as female. (Breedlove 1994),

As a result of *prenatal* hormonal influence, certain types of *behavior* after birth are expressed more frequently among males than females and other types among females in comparison to males.. Females are much more interested in neonates and dolls representing newborn babies than males are for example and males in so called rough and tumble play.

With respect to *sexual behavior*, prenatal hormones *organize* hard wiring in such a way that post-pubertal hormones *activate* specific behaviors. In many animals probably including boys and men, the object of erotic desire is usually determined prior to puberty. In humans, the testosterone surge of puberty then *activates* erotic imagery that has been previously organized. ( Money and Ehrhardt 1972, Breedlove 1994, Hines 1994, Friedman and Downey 2008-@).

) . Prenatal hormones also influence certain *non-sexual childhood* behaviors- - in ways that *do not require* later activation. This is true of rough and tumble play among boys .

## **Rough and Tumble Play**

The fact that rough and tumble play is much more common among boys than girls everywhere in the world, is incontrovertible. The differences in play behavior are not caused by “cultural factors” although of course cultural influences do shape behavior to some degree. The evidence for this and for its cause is so substantial and so well reviewed by developmental psychologists and child psychiatrists that it is not necessary for me to discuss it here. ( Pelligrini and Smith 1998, Maccoby 1998)

I do want to make this qualification, however. When researchers talk about sex differences like this one they do not mean that every single individual in a group expresses the behavior in question, or every single person in a comparison group does not. We all know that many boys are not “rough and tumble” types and many girls are. The

means of the curves that represent these behaviors are different, however. There are exceptional individuals but the groups differ!!( Hines 2004 ). There is absolutely no pathological connotation to any of this. No matter where boys or girls are on a rough and tumble play spectrum –there is no reason to invoke the concept of psychopathology. Rough and tumble play tends to begin in toddlerhood and is expressed more during mid and late childhood. In many people it remains as part of their behavioral repertoire more or less for life.

Despite the fact that rough and tumble play, in itself, is *not a form of aggression*, there probably is a relationship between the biological tendency of boys to engage in rough and tumble play and the fact that boys and men are more aggressive than girls and women.

This sex difference in aggression is also an established fact. It is true no matter how aggression is defined or measured, and has

been through throughout all recorded history. Since written records have been kept there has never been a group of people reported in whom aggressive girls and women outnumber aggressive boys and men. ( Moyer 1974 )

Despite this dramatic fact, there is no simple direct biological cause for male aggression as is the case with rough and tumble play. In order to understand this- and we do-have to understand it because aggression is an important building block in understanding perversion, the notion of *developmental interactions* becomes central.

### **Clinical Illustration**

**Let me** place this in clinical perspective.

Let us imagine a boy of mid-childhood age-who has secure *attachment* relationships. This boy loves rough and tumble including playfighting with other boys . Many are his good friends.

Now consider a different boy who is also programmed to be drawn toward rough and tumble activities. This boy might be

turned into a bully or sadist- by post-natal environmental events such as physical or sexual abuse and/or various types of maternal/paternal neglect. Such a boy might develop menacing threatening behavior or even attack others because of an *interaction* between temperamental predisposition influenced prenatally, and distorted or interrupted attachment relationships. The child's observable behavior is important of course, but so are his internal representations. During the same time period that this boy's bullying, menacing behavior becomes expressed, his cognitive development is occurring. He is encoding representations and creating narratives which some psychotherapist might hear about later on. By late childhood his sexual feelings are also become more persistent and intense. His *sexual scripts* are being constructed in an aggressive, even violent, context. . Such a boy might be more likely to fuse sexual and aggressive narrative themes- and to dehumanize relationships with people who he represents as stimuli for erotic attraction. This is even more likely to take place if he is sexually hyperstimulated in some way. In any

case, these sexual scripts are best understood as being both consequences and causes. That is to say, they result from certain psychological and psychosocial interactions but once constructed they then motivate sexual behavior. The chances are good that once formed usually by late childhood, they will remain in place for life.

Based on what I have said so far, we have some idea of one reason that boys and men might be more aggressive than girls and women. It is probably the result of sequential *prenatal physiological* and *postnatal childhood psychological* influences. The postnatal influences include disordered attachment relationships and traumata-.

### **Prenatal Testosterone May Influence The Capacity For Empathy**

. Prenatal testosterone probably influences certain brain

differences which then ultimately influence the capacity for empathy, social sensitivity, emotional fluency, sensitivity to interpersonal context. ( Friedman and Downey 2008-@) The different ways in which the sexes structure their social relationships including the experience of intimacy, and their communication patterns have been discussed by Deborah Tannen and others. ( Tannen 1994 )

One can readily see that these prenatal predispositions— not as simple unitary “causes” but in interaction with *post-natally occurring life events that are extremely common-* could well account for the much greater tendency of males than females to experience certain relationships in a *dehumanized* way: including romantic and even sexual relationships. Also the same prenatal predisposition, in interaction with postnatal life events involving attachment relationships, as I pointed out

could lead men to be much more aggressive than women.

Dehumanization of the erotic object plus aggression directed at it- are two themes important in understanding perversion. These two themes are not *in themselves* enough to place our discussion in appropriately complex context. To do that we have to understand a bit more about the biology of erotic desire.

### **Biology of Eros: Another Relevant Sex Difference in Behavior**

In many ways men are more directly sexual than women. This is probably due to the different hormonal profiles experienced by the 2 sexes following puberty. In discussing this I am not suggesting that one sex is normal and the other is not. I am not placing any moral or health value on the differences.

In both sexes erotic experience/activity is dependent on testosterone (which in women comes from the ovaries and adrenal glands). Men have much higher blood levels of testosterone than women do and this is widely believed to account for the greater intensity of their sexual drive

Men report spontaneous sexual desire and think about sex more frequently than women do. They have more sexual fantasies and initiate sexual activity more frequently than women. Males masturbate more frequently than females and consume pornography much more frequently. In addition, women are more likely to be asexual than men ( Leitenberg and Henning 1995 )

Of course many *woman are highly sexual.*

Also- a many are quite interested in pornography even

though not as many as men. As I said earlier, this is also generally true of most sex differences in behavior. That is- for most- although there are clear differences between men and women there are many individual exceptions and much overlap between groups as well.

I speculate that when postnatal life circumstances are felicitous and include solid attachments, no major trauma, positive peer relationships, most men are still prone to be drawn toward visual erotic pornography and to imagined sexual activity with novel partners and in novel situations. All that this means is that in day to day life repression does not include certain circuits in subcortical parts of our brains. I don't think that we should call this "perverse" and agree with Freud that this is normal experience. Many men would certainly say that their

minute to minute erotic musing is an important part of the quality of life. There may be an argument that between ages 13 and 45 or so most of what occupies the conscious compartment in the mind of most men is sex. After that it is slowly downhill although many men do what they can to prevent erotic decay.

Politicians may be especially energetic about this but that still has to be determined by research (which however, might have difficulty getting funded).

### **Pornography and Perversion:Stoller's Contributions**

Let me fast forward here to briefly outline psychoanalytic ideas about perversion the topic of today's panel. The subject has been exhaustively addressed by psychoanalysts and I chose Robert

Stoller's contribution to summarize for practical reasons. (Stoller 1975)

Psychoanalysts have been more concerned than descriptive psychiatrists with perverse aspects of "normal" and neurotic sexual experience/activity than with the psychodynamics of paraphilia. Many psychoanalysts have discussed this usually emphasizing the relationship between anal/sadistic exhibitionist/voyeuristic sexual wishes and fears that are extremely common. Sexual "objects" tend to be fetishized, and may be either non-human or part objects. The situational/context frequently emphasizes combinations of the fusion of eros and aggression.

Stoller noted that people with paraphiliac tendencies tend to read pornography that depicts in a condensed way, the narrative structure of their unique sexual preoccupations. He observed that many more people are drawn to pornography than specific groups of paraphiliac patients however and speculated that pornography fulfills widespread voyeuristic and sado-maschistic needs.

Stoller's discussion of the relationship between erotic excitement

and hostility is at the center of the theory. He suggested that conscious and unconscious hostility, fused with erotic desire motivate both pornography and perversion and intense erotic arousal. ( Stoller 1975)

As Stoller pointed out most people who consume pornography are not paraphiliacs. They regularly use the products of an international industry which counts its profits in the billions of dollars. In recent years, pornography on the *internet* especially has flourished and psychotherapists everywhere have become acquainted with the defensive use of pornography among lonely people, people with sexual relationship problems and those with primary major psychopathology. Some spend so much time on internet pornography that they seem to be “addicted” to it. One is reminded of classical laboratory studies which showed that rats capable of directly stimulating pleasure center circuits in the brain with a lever press will repeatedly do so even in lieu of access to food, water and, even to the point of death.

The topic of pornography necessarily calls attention to *sexual values* since objectification and humiliation of the erotic object are part of the pornographic narrative line. Some may consider pornography inherently immoral.

I am not going to discuss that particular issue here. I think that regardless of how psychotherapists feel about psychiatric diagnosis most would agree that when pornography use becomes peremptory, interferes with daily activities, undermines relationships with partners, it assumes a pathological quality. This occurs much more frequently among men than women.

Stoller also suggested, however, that romantic novels are the female equivalent of the type of erotic pornography that interests so many boys and men.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I discussed the usefulness of a developmental model of some complexity that sheds light on the predisposition of men to so called “perverse” sexual behavior I emphasized the importance of both biological influences and attachment

relationships in shaping behavior. I outlined three crucial developmental phases. The first occurs prenatally and is biological, the second phase involves attachment relationships and traumatic experiences that occur during childhood. The third phase that I discussed is pubertal. The prenatal and pubertal biological effects of testosterone may be viewed as “bookends” as it were *In between them are all important experiential events, experiences, representations and narrative constructions that shape behavior. These experiential events are processed differently by males and females, however because of biological influences.*

I elected not to consider the complex issues concerning perversion in women today, given the limitations of time ,

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