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Standard Deviations

# Why "Eroticized Rage" Is a Nonsense Concept

Sex negative bias disguised as psychoanalytic jargon cannot go unchallenged. Posted in Psychology Today: Aug 05, 2016



Source: 'Seven Deadly Sins', labelled for reuse, Wikipedia

The term 'eroticized rage' may be unknown to most, but it is very familiar amongst therapists who specialize in sex addiction. Now, sex addiction is very controversial in its own right and the American Psychiatric Association (APA) declined to include it in the latest version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM 5) which came out in 2013. I take a very critical view of it in my upcoming book *Modern Sexuality*, but instead of harping more on it here, I would just refer you to the works of David Ley and Barry Reay for further background.

Taking a quick Google search for the phrase 'eroticized rage', we find as the first result an essay by the very pioneer

of the sex addiction model, Patrick Carnes. In this short piece, Carnes cites cases of an airline pilot that wanted to have an affair after a fight with his wife and a stripper that felt powerful when men gave her money as examples of eroticized rage. Let's hold off for a moment on the glaringly obvious possibility that Carnes is pathologizing normal variants of human behavior and instead take a short history of the concept of eroticized rage in order to place it in its proper context.

As far as I have been able to determine, eroticized rage has its origins in psychoanalytic theory. Indeed, famous psychoanalyst Robert Stoller wrote an entire book on his theories of eroticized rage, entitled *Perversion: The erotic form of hatred*.

In Stoller's view, "perversions" (i.e. fetishes) were the byproduct of some trauma-induced event in which the particular perversion in question was created as a defense against the trauma. So, in other words, if some young boy had an older sister smother him with her bare feet, rather than experience the pain of his humiliation, he would develop an arousal pattern to feet, protecting him from the fallout of his trauma. In this way Stoller claimed, perversions were the epitome of "triumph over tragedy."

Other psychoanalytic-inspired thinkers of the time (1960s-80s) wrote in a similar vein. Analyst Masud Khan claimed that "perversions" were an example of a schizoid personality type, while Phyllis Greenacre claimed they were a result of some "pre-oedipal" attachment glitch between infant and mother, in which the fetish was now being used as a "transitional object," since obviously fetishists cannot form healthy relationships. Ahem.

Even sexologist John Money got into the act even though he was not a psychoanalyst. He resurrected the old term "paraphilia," originally coined by Friedrich Salomon Krauss way back in 1903 and theorized that these "loves beyond the norm" were due to ruptures in the subject's love map. In his book of the very same name, *Love Maps*, Money argues in favor of a trauma etiology, much like Stoller but without the analytic verbiage. Instead, as a means of explaining the reinforcement of paraphilias, he leans upon a concept known as "opponent-process theory," which argues that experiences that initially seem more fearful and unpleasant and less thrilling over time reverse and become more thrilling and less fearful. Here is where we make the transition to the addiction model, as opponent-process theory became most popular in its usage within addictionology.

All of these theories may seem antiquated and outdated looking through a modern lens, but they still hold great resonance in the field. Take a look at this course syllabus from 2013 for example, simply entitled "Perversion." I have to wonder if these students taking the class are truly being prepared to work effectively with clients they may see that are struggling with issues around sexuality. Most damning, this entire body of knowledge was constructed using small sample sizes, usually of only one (yes, one!), in skewed settings (psychoanalytic couches). Basically an entire knowledge base of sexuality was built up by a few biased individuals observing at best only a handful of individuals seeking psychoanalytic treatment. The field of psychology is currently debating the merits of evidence-based treatment, but this hardly qualifies as evidence or treatment.



Source: 'Horned Deity', labelled for reuse, Wikipedia

Now that we've covered a lot of historical ground, let's take a look at the current applications of 'eroticized rage' and see if they have any merits. The first thing to understand is that this term makes certain assumptions right off the bat. It assumes that there is a certain type of sex that is 'normal.' This type of sex is devoid of any traces of aggression whatsoever-- it must or otherwise it would be a type of

eroticized rage, right? So what we are talking about here is soft snuggly lovemaking, eye gazing, pillow talk, and the like. Most everything else must be verboten because we must only express love, never rage (aggression) in a sexual context. However, this tripe has long ago been debunked.

In his research, psychologist Donald Mosher discovered that individuals participate in three types of sex-- trance (which means just a focus on physical sensation), role play (more psychological in nature, includes power dynamics and BDSM) and partner engagement (love-dovey eye gazing endorsed by sex addiction advocates). Mosher's research indicates that people practice a wide variety of sexual behaviors and they were all experienced as healthy components of a loving relationship. Remember, he studied partnered systems, not lone individuals.

Further, sexologist Jack Morin, in his seminal book *The Erotic Mind*, interviewed hundreds of individuals and found that many experienced peak sexual experiences when they were in contact with a wide assortment of emotions. Indeed, overcoming ambivalence was a key ingredient for peak sexual experiences for many. In this way, playing with shame but in a way that was experienced within the context of acceptance was a powerful use of sexuality intersecting with personal growth. Similarly, within a sexual context, fear could be transformed into love, guilt into freedom, and yes good old anger into appreciation and satisfaction. According to Morin, all kinds of emotions play a role in sexual behavior, not just love, and they can be experienced by many as not only healthy and connective, but also healing. Indeed, I spoke on some of these healing aspects in my talk on Psychological Edge Play at this year's AltSex NYC Conference.

Well, what about rapists and those who engage in other types of sexual violence? Aren't they motivated by 'eroticized rage'? In short, no. Dr. Neil Malamuth, who specializes in studying sex offenders (and whom I debated in front of a live national

audience two days ago) has developed what he calls his "confluence model" in which he states that a small subset of men with "hostile masculinity" are susceptible to violence. He characterizes them as having "macho" personalities typical of what we would identify as antisocial personality disorder. But why do they have antisocial traits? Because of 'eroticized rage'? Rage doesn't create sociopathy. If it did, we would all be walking sociopaths. And anyway, research shows that personality is roughly 50% genetic. It just doesn't make any sense any way you slice it.

Anger is evolutionary, just like all other emotions. Scapegoating it as an inappropriate participant in sex play not only betrays a deep ignorance and misunderstanding of sexuality but also a deeply ambivalent and unresolved relationship to anger itself on the part of the 'eroticized rage' theorist. Sex is many things to many people. Trying to pretend that sex only exists on the level of partner engagement (love y dove y) only pathologizes the normal and seeks to impose an arbitrary, authoritarian, and deeply biased sex-negative worldview on the lives of others. It's time to finally rid ourselves of this nonsense concept.