

Paraphilias



Arnold Davidson

When does habit become addiction? When does looking become voyeurism? And when does sexual play become paraphilia? Adults often engage in sexual games that exhibit variety, playfulness, and flexibility, but a range of practices are labeled as perversions, and those who practice them are identified as deviant. How to place human behavior along a continuum ranging from normative to pathological was one of the central questions of the October 18 roundtable, *Paraphilias*.

Moderator **Otto Kernberg**, Director of the Personality Disorders Institute at New York Presbyterian Hospital, Westchester Division, launched the discussion by noting that cultural biases can influence ostensibly scientific classifications of human behavior. Paraphilia is a term created for the Diagnostic Statistical Manual (better known as DSM-IV) to replace the term perversion, because, as Kernberg put it, perversion “sounds like something bad, ugly, disgusting.” He went on to specify the clinical definition of perversion as any sexual activity with sadistic, masochistic, voyeuristic, exhibitionistic, or fetishistic behavior that becomes so rigid and repetitive that sexual excitement becomes narrowly linked to such activity, resulting in the loss of a broad spectrum of sexual behavior. But Kernberg emphasized that the divide between public and private sexuality, as defined throughout history by the oscillation between Puritanism and libertinism, rendered clinical definitions inadequate.

Linda Williams, Professor of Film Studies and Rhetoric at the University of California at Berkeley, linked the evolution of public perceptions about sexual behavior with their depiction in film. For many years, she noted, a brief, non-sexual kiss was the most that was tolerated in American films. Williams cited the 1986 film *Blue Velvet*, in which a voyeur witnesses a primal, fetishistic sexual scene, as a turning point in the acceptance of paraphiliac sexuality in American cinema. A parallel development was the emergence of what Williams called “hard core art,” which goes beyond simulated sex to explore sexual play in a range of expressions. She cited John Cameron Mitchell’s recent film, *Short Bus*, as cinema that actually uses, and celebrates, polymorphous perversity.

Arnold Davidson, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Chicago and author of *The Emergence of Sexuality*, questioned the very feasibility of engaging in a scientific discussion about sexuality. Attempts to define paraphilia reflect a desire to demarcate sexual criteria outside the realm of politics and morality, influences that, according to Davidson, are almost impossible to disregard. He added that fluctuating morality posed further obstacles to concrete classifications, noting that masturbation was once thought to be pathological.

Richard Krueger, Medical Director of the Sexual Behavior Clinic at New York State Psychiatric Institute, speculated about what one could hope to gain by trying to define sexuality in scientific terms. Echoing Davidson’s ambivalence about the feasibility of scientific inquiry into the topic, he cited Darwin’s assertion that “We do not even in the least know the final causes of sexuality. The whole subject is hidden in darkness.” He went on to note that even the book *Sexual Deviance*, considered the most comprehensive volume on the subject, reports that most of the work in the area consists of unfounded statements, unsupported data, and unevaluated case reports. The lack of scientific discovery on the subject, Krueger argued, derives from societal misgivings, resulting in a dearth of funding for rigorous studies of deviant sexuality, which, if given support, could potentially lead to important discoveries about sexual criminality.

The need to define sexual behavior is rarely a professional imperative for **Susan Winemaker**, author of the memoir, *Concertina: The Life and Loves of a Dominatrix*. She explained that her role as a dominatrix is never to ask where a perversion comes from, but to explore with a client his or her central fantasy. “It’s beyond sexual satisfaction,” she elaborated, “it’s about sexual exploration. It’s about openness.” Asked if her clients worry about whether or not they suffer from pathology, she replied, “Yes, I suppose they do. However in this safe space, they don’t. It’s not really a question of what’s normal or not normal. It’s a question of curiosity.”

The panelists scrutinized some of the terminology used to describe paraphilia, in particular the characterization of sexual acts that become rigid or ritualistic as being pathological. Winemaker maintained that, even when a client repeatedly engages a preferred fantasy, there are variations within the repetition that allow for deeper exploration, and even creativity and invention. Professor Williams pointed out that what is termed normal sex can be very rigid, without being classified as deviant.



Susan Winemaker

In response to one of Winemaker’s anecdotal descriptions, Center Co-Director Edward Nersessian proposed that it might be instructive to ask why one of her clients enjoys a particular form of near-asphyxiation. The comment elicited objections from several panelists, who deemed such questions irrelevant and potentially indicative of systemic intolerance towards alternative ways of engaging sexuality. The exchange was reflective of a highly charged topic, in which personal choice is often placed in direct opposition to societal and scientific norms. Perhaps the most incisive question came when Professor Davidson asked what, beyond reproduction, is the appropriate function of sexuality? In most definitions of paraphilia, he noted, that question is not clearly answered. *A.L.*