

Capital University, Spring 2012

A neuropsychological approach to sexuality and disability

Sexuality is a normal component of mental and physical processes that begins in childhood and continues through adolescence and far into adulthood. A strong argument has been made that expressing sexuality is vital to the psychological and physical health of human beings (Denboer & Hough, 2010). Historically, sexuality has been shaped by the sociocultural influences of the environment that an individual is exposed to; this is important when considering what type of sexual behavior should be classified as normal or deviant (DenBoer & Hough, 2010). Moreover, sex refers to an individual's anatomy, and not whom they are attracted to or how they feel about their own gender (Denboer & Hough, 2010). Physical disability, another facet of this literature review, is defined as a "disturbance or defect (that can) impede or eliminate the human body's ability by disturbing human structure and shape. Physical disability may occur due to neonatal, natal or postnatal causes" (Cumurcu, Karlidag, & Almis. 2012. p. 84). Finally, individuals with intellectual disabilities must be considered when discussing sexuality and disabilities. Parents of children with intellectual disabilities were analyzed in a 2009 study that tested knowledge, concerns, attitudes and opinions about the sexuality of their child. Conclusions were drawn that "crucial responsibility" relies with the parents of intellectually disabled children to provide opportunities for adolescents to have sexual experiences. Moreover, almost half of the adolescents with intellectual disabilities tested did not speak about sexuality with their families (Isler, Beytut, Tas, & Conk, 2009).

As outlined in the introduction, there are three major facets necessary to assist and understand sexuality in a patient with an intellectual or physical disability:

Is there a physical disability?

Is there a mental disability?

Is the patient being taught sexual education in a way that the patient understands the topics? Are they able to develop emotionally and sexually throughout this process?

As sexuality is recognized as a normal human function, it is important to consider how sexual desires and activity may be affected by a disability. In a four-cohort study conducted in 2009, common issues were identified amongst a sample of disabled participants:

“How do we protect them from being hurt? How do we make staff arrange for sexual encounters? What are the differences between man and woman? How can we protect them from sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy?” (Swango-Wilson, 2009. p. 227).

These questions apply to all patients with cognitive impairment, regardless of the etiology of the disability. Moreover, sexuality has been shown to be important to both the mentally and physically disabled (Denboer & Hough, 2010).

In order to answer the questions proposed in the 2009 four-cohort study, it is important that clinical neuropsychologists have a solid understanding of the relationship between sexuality and disability. “Sexual education provides the individual to understand his/her physical, emotional and sexual development, to develop a positive concept of self, to develop positive behavior towards human sexuality and moral values [3]. Research shows that compared with the average, people with low cognitive abilities have limited knowledge of sex, pregnancy, contraception, sexually transmitted disease (STDs), marriage, homosexuality, and sexual interaction” (Isler, et al., 2009).

To properly prepare disabled children and adolescents for a healthy life with sexual encounters, the baseline for sexual education must take place with the parents in the home. Since most parents are not professionally trained in sexual education, the literature recommends that the number of organizations assisting parents with disabled children be increased (Isler, et al., 2009). Furthermore, the specific disability that a person has can be used to tailor an education that will be best suited for them (Cumurcu, Karlidag & Almis, 2012). From a professional perspective, it is important for competent clinical neuropsychologists to increase their knowledge of the relationship between sexuality and disability, as well as neurological etiology of sexual dysfunction. "Brain and body function join the psychosocial and individualization factors in the realization of human sexuality and expression" (Denboer & Hough, 2010).

References

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Horror Film Criticism: Compare and Contrast

“They went up there alive and came back down dead! Did you notice that? The difference, I mean: alive, dead, dead, alive, that sort of thing? It wasn’t difficult to spot. He killed them both.” Alex Law, *Shallow Grave*

Since the explosion of horror films on the movie scene decades ago, the genre has continued to evolve and grow, morphing into the elaborate, violent films like *Saw* and *Hostel* seen today. Though several aspects of the genre were left behind long ago, there are still several thematic elements that have remained consistent from the legendary days of Hitchcock to cheap ‘thrill’ films that never grace theater screens. This essay will explore the changes seen in horror films throughout the last several decades as they relate to sociology, psychology, and violence in the films *Rope* and *Shallow Grave*. First, I will compare and contrast the two films as they relate to these three points. Then, I will expand upon the sociological and psychological factors that keep horror films alive and breathing. Quiet beasts of the cinema, they are timeless in their ability to drag viewers in and clutch tightly.

Dissonance seen over time between the films is due to both progression in culture, and a growing fascination with violence and death. This preoccupation with death comes both from our fear of being a helpless victim, and a fascination with the possibility of taking another person’s life. This is not to say that people are more violent now than ever before, but rather that at this moment in history, film is the prime medium to explore our fear and fascinations with the end of a life. This element of fascination with death can be clearly seen in *Rope*. Brandon and Phillip open the film by committing the murder of a mutual friend

simply because they want the excitement of a random killing. In *Shallow Grave*, though the first victim is not murdered by the main characters, the act of sawing the body into pieces in order to keep the money he left is arguably much worse than murder. Though the motive of the crime in *Shallow Grave* is less for the fantasy of murder and more about greed as a sentient being, the thematic element of violence and a twisted psyche can be easily seen in both films.

The theme of violence and a psychological and sociological fascination with murder is not only the foundation for both films, but arguably the driving force. Ever present in *Rope*, it becomes blatant in *Shallow Grave*, a film that exploits the fault of the human condition. We, as a people, are susceptible to committing the unthinkable. While *Rope* is built upon the desire to kill, *Shallow Grave* showcases the terrifying prospect that anyone could become a murderer. The human mind is fragile. The films force audiences to ask themselves: How far would I be willing to go? What could push *me* from entertaining fantastical ideologies, into becoming a killer? The change between films is subtle, but vital to recognize, and simple in its message. Every individual has dark components lurking within their subconscious, but no one has to want to become a murderer. Circumstance can alter a person into an entity they once could have never envisioned.

The sociological component of both films is important to note. The political and social milieu depicted in *Rope* is that of an affluent, conservative, educated group of family and friends. The rebellious attraction of murder is alluring to Brandon and Phillip because it is so unfathomable. The pressure that accompanies this type of lifestyle was a motivating factor in committing a murder; they felt a sense of release when they were finished. In stark contrast, *Shallow Grave* takes place in the United Kingdom. The cultural differences between the United

States and Scotland are pronounced, but are not necessarily important to consider when contrasting *Shallow Grave* and *Rope*. The main characters in *Shallow Grave* were educated, but street-smart, and perhaps did not come from a “rich” background. Money was an easy motivating factor to convince them to commit atrocities. In *Rope*, Brandon and Phillip weren’t interested in money. They had enough of it already. They wanted thrill, an adrenaline rush. The differences between the social and political factors between the two films are circumstantially relevant, because the events that transpired within the films would have been vastly different if those two components were altered.

Regardless of motive, environment or morality in horror films, the public continues to rush to the theater when a new scary movie hits the screen. The primal fascination that I mentioned at the commencement of this analysis is the root for why horror as a genre continues to survive. The human mind is a complex frightening place, which entertains the possibility of murder and victimization as one that is not so far off. Yet, instead of engaging in the act ourselves, we watch in fascination as others do it through a screen.

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The pursuit of happiness: Exploring the meaning of a happy and healthy life

The pursuit of happiness is a road that has been trudging by travelers since the creation of man. As we pass through our lives and onto the unknown, it is impossible not to question the purpose of our existence. Science, history and geology tell stories of times that have passed, and give insight into the delicate and intimate interworking of the smallest cells in the human body down to the core of the earth. But what is the purpose of these intricate systems? What use is the reconstruction of a dinosaur skeleton or the display of Michelangelo's artwork if there is no purpose behind its existence? It strikes a question that has been battled over for centuries, too often at the cost of precious life itself. What is the purpose of our short lives? William James argued that it is the pursuit of happiness through religion, and consequentially, a happy and healthy mind.

“If we were to ask the question: ‘What is human life’s chief concern?’ one of the answers we should receive would be: ‘It is happiness.’ How to gain, how to keep, how to recover happiness, is in fact for most men at all times the secret motive of all they do, and of all they are willing to endure,” (James, 1903. p. 78). It is without question that William James had insight to what all human beings are intimately aware of: our desire to feel happiness, and the drive to live what we deem to be a full and fruitful life.

Where James and I disagree is the notion that religion and happiness are intertwined; albeit happiness may be one of many products of spirituality, or a feeling of closeness to “God”, that is not to say that people without religion, or without God, are unhappy. Furthermore, it raises the question of human emotions in relation to the existence of the unseen and the unknown.

“With such relations between religion and happiness, it is perhaps not surprising that men come to regard the happiness which a religious belief affords as a proof of its truth” (James, 1903. p. 80).

This statement paves the way for what is most certainly a complex set of philosophical questions. Does the existence of an emotion prove the existence of an object, being, or theory? Does it prove anything at all? Perhaps certain aspects of life, such as the notion of evil, only exist because we can feel them. Can the same be applied to a God, or the occult? Does an inference and evaluation of the situation make it true? Can perceptions be affirmed as fact? Some would argue yes, that certain things exist simply because we feel them.

Walt Whitman, the world-famous American poet, is cited by James as one an individual who is “the supreme contemporary example of such an inability to feel evil” (James, 1903. p. 81). James goes on to describe him as a “pagan”, referencing the words of Whitman’s disciple, Dr. Bucke: “He never spoke deprecatingly of any nationality...he never swore. He never spoke in anger and [apparently] was never angry. He never exhibited fear, and I do not believe he ever felt it” (James, 1903. p. 81). James believed that Whitman was so successful in his writing because he “persuaded the reader that men and women, life and death, and all things are divinely good” (James, 1903. p. 81).

This is an important observation to make because it shows how James believed that God worked through all beings, even though Whitman himself was not inherently religious. James is quoted as saying, “Many persons today regard [Whitman] as the restorer of the eternal natural religion. He has infected them with his own love of comrades, with his own

gladness that he and they exist....he is even explicitly compared with the founder of the Christian religion” (James, 1903. p. 82).

James certainly valued religion, and incorporated it into his writing, even when there was perhaps nothing inherently religious about the situation. James took what he knew and believed, and tried to make sense of the world through it.

Therefore, it is understandable why he and other 19th century men associated emotion with existence, and in turn, proof for the existence of God. While major advancements in science and technology had been made, most of the commodities of the modern world did not exist. Individuals were forced to rely on their senses and the basic understanding they possessed of the world and its complex systems.

I suspect when reading James’ original quote about men’s desire for happiness, and subsequently his opinion on happiness as it relates to God, that many people did not view the two issues separately. If feeling happiness served as proof of a deity, which assured someone of feeling a sense of closeness to God, happiness would indeed be the most important emotion in existence. To obtain it could even be interpreted as proof that God acknowledged an individual. Obtaining happiness would be a very important goal indeed for people during the 19th century.

In contrast, the modern Western world views happiness in a much different way. Happiness can be obtained through multiple mediums, and varies in both length and quality. This emotion can be derived from money, power, and many others. These are a whole slew of things that would have once been thought of as sinful and horrible. For example, people who derived pleasure from something like sex (or those who treated it as a commodity and not a religious or sacred necessity) were once seen as evil, and surely were expected to go to

hell by the general population. Today, sexual freedom is seen as an actual right and expectation. Adults in relationships absent of sex are generally seen as unusual, even flawed.

Obviously, the Western viewpoint of sex and its importance to a happy, well-rounded individual has developed and evolved over many centuries. The purpose of elaborating on this topic is to show how times, fashions, and ways of thinking change as society continues to develop. It is also relevant as it relates to contemporary psychology.

Viewpoints in psychology, like religion and societal standards, have evolved throughout the last several hundred years. It has been fairly recently that major advancements have developed in psychology. In just the last few decades, this includes the removal of “homosexuality” as a mental illness from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual, as well as the implementation of new phenomena not previously acknowledged in a professional setting, such as self-harm and trichotillomania. Understanding historical points of view, such as James’, is vital to the continued honing of the subject matter and practices of psychology. It is also important to recognize how issues that he was discussing in the 19th century are still relevant today.

Ultimately, Religion and culture are a massive part of psychology, and are even cited in the literature to be considered when diagnosing abnormal behavior (Barlow & Durand, 2012). It is also important to consider, despite the time difference, if James has a relevant point. Is religion a cause of happiness? And if so, in what population? Moreover, is happiness directly connected with the presence of a “healthy mind”? Can someone with a mental illness possess a healthy mind? As the next generation continues to grow and emerge into the psychological arena, these questions are important to ponder and consider as we begin to practice in this complex area. Despite the reality that we may never find a satiable

answer, the human race will continue to ponder these questions, as we have for thousands of years, as we move forward in our lives and on the road to the pursuit of true happiness; a life well lived.

References

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