

Eroticized Rage:

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Rage and anger have long been recognized as a component in sexual violence. Much has in fact been written about the profiles of those who impose their sexual desires on others. Even more has been written about the cultural dynamics between men and women of which such violence is but the tip of the iceberg. As women have gained more political and economic power we have also an emerging clarity about the abuse of women, children – and men. That clarity has resulted in a new accountability that extends into the most powerful circles of our culture. CEO's of business, church leaders, military officers, and even the nation's most powerful political leaders have been held accountable for abusing the less powerful. We are in the midst of an incredible paradigm shift about the use power and our responsibility to others. Many say that protection of the vulnerable and sexual accountability may result in the most significant change in the history of our species. I believe that is true.

Yet, I also believe there is anger that has been sexualized that is not connected to our larger social drama or at best tangential to it. There are also forms of victimization based on anger that have never been considered in the larger debate. Anger and rage have many faces in human sexual behavior that have been obscured by their erotic content. We have tried to make sense out of sexual behavior without its affective component. Advances in our understanding of trauma, addiction, neurochemistry, and courtship place a whole new perspective on the role of anger in sex. New sexual freedoms, especially in cyberspace, provide painful clarity about how destructive eroticized rage can be. Anger and sex can be fused in such a way that it is self-perpetuating, self-destructive, and once ignited independent of culture and even family. Clinicians who do not look for the role of eroticized rage will miss the function or payoff of their patients behavior. The purpose of this article is to provide clinicians with a basic discussion of the range of sexual behaviors whose driving force is anger and what to watch for.

Consider the following:

- Many websites dedicated to “voyeurism” frequently post nude pictures of spouses, ex-girlfriends, and ex-spouses submitted by men who report that these women do not know about the posting. To post a nude picture for others sexual gratification without that

persons knowledge or permission is angry and vengeful. The reciprocal also occurs. Angry ex's post nude pictures of themselves to retaliate for being rejected. On the site, however, the comments are about sex and not about the angry purposes.

- An airline pilot has a problem with compulsive affairs in an industry in which this problem is all too common. He comes however from a very devout and restrictive religious tradition and is tormented with shame and guilt. He is a father of three and a deacon in his church. But he also has had sex with over five hundred women in about fifteen years. In therapy he realizes that he has anger for the church and anger for his wife. The breakthrough came when he had a fight with his wife and felt immediately extreme desire to be sexual outside the marriage. His therapist helped him to see that his inability to respond to his wife adequately triggered the sexual acting out. He could get revenge without her knowing it and restore equality for himself internally. The pilot learned how dysfunctional his inability to get angry with his wife was, how his feelings about the church and its sexual teachings supercharged his acting out, and how his compulsive behavior was fueled in part by his sexualized rage.
- A lovely college educated black women worked as a stripper. She had a history of extensive sexual and physical abuse by men in her family. She reported to her therapist the sexual gratification she would feel when men took out there wallets to get money to put on the stage or in her garter. In her view she had humiliated them and saw them as despicable. She felt superior, powerful, and sexual. Her therapist pointed out how this recycled the abuse experiences in her family. She became powerful and rageful when sexual. Nor was this dynamic restricted to her dancing. She had a history of being sexual with teachers, a college professor, and her doctor. Sex was the great equalizer with the many men with whom she had been sexual. Unfortunately it also left her with suicidality, emptiness, sexual addiction, and a pernicious drug habit.
- An accountant who had always lived by the rules discovered his wife had had a series of affairs with black men. He felt very betrayed and angry but also obsessed and aroused by what she had done. He reported that the hottest sex they had ever had was when he was gathering details of her exploits. He then discovered cybersex and went to the sites which featured black men with white women. He went downhill fast. He was averaging thirty

hours a week doing cybersex and neglecting his job. He started to collect pornography of black and white couples and became a regular customer for prostitutes. His asking his wife for details became badgering and harassing. When he was asked by his therapist if he had stalked his wife he said no, he would never do that. The therapist rephrased the question and asked if he had followed his wife. Absolutely he responded. He had her actually under surveillance all the time. The therapist helped the patient understand the role of unresolved anger in his now sexually compulsive pattern. In therapy the wife also admitted that even her selection of black men was about her anger.

- The wife of a high profile figure went to a therapist because of her extreme unhappiness and depression. She had been sexually acting out in many ways for over a decade. She reported she even had oral sex with male strippers in public. Her husband did not know this nor about her other activities. But the fact he could learn of it was erotic. Her therapist observed that it may have been erotic but it was also angry. Such a public display was designed to humiliate and embarrass her successful partner. It was as if she was toying with his humiliation while not quite doing it. And then she could obsess about it. Her therapist explained that the “perverse” part of perversion is often vengeful, or defiant anger.

In each of these cases anger and eroticism have become intertwined or fused. The mechanisms for that are easy to understand. We have to start with understanding the arousal template.

The Arousal Template

Each of us have an arousal template. As we grow up we incorporate our life experiences and our sexual experience with what we are told or learn about sex into a sexual belief system or map. What we learn about relationships and family is also part of that. This template builds on preferences already determined by our genetic code. Whether we like tall or short, blonds or redheads -- it is determined by this mix of physiology and learning. It is the guide we use to what is erotic. John Money, the famous Johns Hopkins researcher, called this a “love map.” It is actually more than just a map however since it determines decisions in its own right and becomes a template for action. Much of that “decision tree” remains unconscious.

Almost anything can become part of the arousal template. A rural child growing up where there was no running water might have snuck up behind the out house to peer in and watch female family members urinate. Curiosity and arousal then become connected with urination. As an adult, urination becomes a cue for arousal. Pornography of women urinating or spy cams in rest rooms or prostitutes willing to give “golden showers” – all become part of that original scenario or story. Similarly some men become fascinated as adolescents with girls who smoke. As adults they seek restaurants or parks near high schools where they can watch girls smoke, or cruise in their car areas where girls smoke. Or, if they really want to take a short cut, they can seek out the many websites dedicated to girls smoking. These are not necessarily nude pictures. It is the smoking itself combined with the age of the women (young) that has become eroticized. Similarly many cybersex addicts report that even picking up a keyboard or listening to the sounds of a modem connecting becomes sexual.

As objects, situations, or scenarios become eroticized so do feelings. In many basic psychology courses in college, students learn of experiments that showed people were more attractive when the subject perceived fear or risk either to themselves or that person. Fear and risk is a well-documented neurochemical escalator of the sexual experience. So is pain. Many trauma victims of violent sexual abuse as children report that as adults they were unable to be orgasmic unless a man is hurting them. I have had many trauma clients tell me that they could not even masturbate unless they put astringent or abrasive material in their vagina. They could not even stimulate themselves without the pain.

Consider the very successful scientist who told of a violent childhood. He can remember his father battering his mother so bad he could hear her body hit the wall in the next room. He would masturbate to comfort himself in his anxiety. He also had a problem wetting the bed and defecating in his nightclothes until he was six. As an adult, he found fear erotic – any kind of fear. He would seek high-risk sex compulsively. And his own feces and urine was highly arousing. To use the clinical term “coprophilia” hardly captures the full picture of what happened to this man. Behind what many would call perverse is a traumatized child.

In the same fashion anger becomes eroticized. First, anger occurs in situations of high risk and fear. Anger adds intensity to the sexual experience and becomes a neurochemical escalator as fear does. Secondly, anger is often core to the scenarios, stories, and beliefs embedded in the arousal template. Therefore, current sexual behavior can draw enormous energy from past wounds and experience. Finally, anger becomes the sexual

stimulus for some people. In order to make sense of how anger stimulates, we have to break the situations down into component types or profiles.

Power and the Restoration of Self

In this profile sex is used to restore power in some way. In the case above where the husband could not deal with conflict with his spouse, he restored his sense of self by acting out in a way in which she had no control. It is like he keeps a secret account in which he returns to parity if added to the public account. His self-talk is about deserving the sex because he is so misunderstood, or she deserves what he does because her behavior is so bad. Except she never finds out. The possibility that she might find out makes the behavior's value almost as good as if he had done it front of her. We are also talking intimacy disorder here. The inability to be intimate is part of the problem. The above example resulted in the sexually compulsive behavior of the sex addict. Addiction is often the solution to an intimacy deficit.

Achieving parity in this way is one of the most common profiles of eroticized rage. Coincidentally it is also one of the most common causes for affairs. In a sense it parallels what object relations theorists have pointed to when aspects of relationships or sex become objectified so that people can "complete" themselves. The "object" becomes the piece that was missing. The result is to end up equal to the other or more likely superior.

Consider the story of Tammy. Her father was clearly a sex addict and frequently did sexually inappropriate things in public, which embarrassed Tammy as she grew up. He also did highly inappropriate things at home such as walking around in the nude. He had many affairs and sexually abused Tammy's three sisters. Therein started the problem. Tammy was like many siblings of abused children asking herself why he had not approached her. He did however like to look at her body and often commented about her sexual development. Tammy would deliberately take showers in her father's bathroom so he would have the opportunity to observe her – even though she had a bathroom for her own use.

Tammy grew into an almost statuesque, beautiful woman. When she was seventeen she was caught shoplifting clothes. The shopkeeper pulled her into a back room and told her she could keep the clothes if she would show him her breasts. She did and he pleased himself. She left with the clothes and a very unique feeling. She felt he had betrayed his vulnerability. Sex had reversed the situation. She was no longer the desperate teenager about to be turned into the police by an authority. That power figure had become in her

eyes pathetic and disgusting. Moreover exhibiting her body was very sexually arousing and satisfying to her. And she had the clothes.

This scenario was repeated over and over again in various forms. As a high-powered advertising executive she kept accounts on several occasions where she was asked to have sex by a client. She would have relationships usually with older men who were powerful and unattractive but she would feel in control because of their sexual desperation. For awhile she was engaged to a man who was much older and weighed three hundred pounds. She enjoyed sex with him. The best sex was after they broke up and he would leave her money. She owned that watching a man take money out of his wallet was very erotic for her. She knew she had won at that point.

Tammy would drive down the freeway with her dress hiked up to expose her genitals and her blouse open to expose her breasts. She would pull up next to trucks and feel great pleasure when truckers would pull their air horn cords in approval. When Tammy got into recovery for alcoholism, she was extremely sexually active with men she met in AA meetings. The list goes on. Suffice to say she was out of control and with time become suicidal.

In treatment Tammy admitted that she had several standing arrangements with the owners of prestigious clothing stores on fashionable Rodeo drive in Hollywood. She could pick out the clothes she wanted if she would strip for these merchants. They would pleasure themselves and she would walk away feeling superior. This in fact was a repetition of what had happened when she was a teenager. Her therapist helped Tammy to understand that it also replicated her taking showers in her father's bathroom to get him to notice her. Tammy admitted that the clothing store she loved to do this was around the corner from her father's upscale apartment. Something about his proximity made her sexually acting out more compelling. It was then that she confessed to actually having sex with a man in her father's bed on the night of one of his weddings.

Clinician's will note that Tammy is classic. Her behavior replicates the way she was abused as a child. Bessel van der Kolk and others have described this as "repetition compulsion" or "addiction to the trauma." This sexually compulsive behavior provides a "rush" based on an arousal template she evolved in trying to work through her own relationship with her father. Note further, however, the completion of self and the cycle of her affect. Tammy was desperate for her father's approval however she could get it. She was angry about his treatment of her and despised how he behaved. Getting his attention and feeling she was better than by exposing him for what he was, created the internal dynamic and payoff. When Tammy

finally understood all this she was able to arrest her compulsive cycles. She also realized that while on the surface she looked like a victim used by men, there was a deeper part that now was operative wherein she was the predator. This part was fed by her anger and hatred of men.

Sexualized anger can be used in an attempt to restore a sense of self. Usually this involves some form of abuse and power. In studies of women and sex addiction this power dynamic and the propping up of the self is frequently noticed. The sex offender literature notes parallels for offenders who attempt to compensate for self, replicate childhood abuse, and have rage for women that comes out sexually. Throughout this paper I am trying to set aside the larger issues of oppression of women and children. I think they are the critical issues of our time. Yet I wish to show the mechanisms separate from these critical cultural issues. The point is that sexualized anger becomes a vehicle for our patients to feel better themselves by creating a new parity using sex.

Humiliation, Vengeance, and Retaliation

The reader will notice that the examples used so far involve some humiliation or revenge. The attempt to restore the self driven by sexualized rage may extend to diminishing someone. This may mean diminishing the sexual partner as in the merchants to whom Tammy felt superior or the stripper feeling disgust for the men who tip her. Remember in both of these cases they felt superior and intensely sexual. It may result in diminishing the marital partner as in the woman performing public oral sex. Or, in Tammy's case, it may be in humiliating the father or getting to him somehow as in despoiling his bed on his wedding night. Posting a nude picture of your ex wife for all to see without her permission has a sexual component and a vengeance component. Usually when sexualized rage becomes vengeance the issues are deep and profound. Consider this next example.

When Louise was sixteen she became pregnant and gave up her son for adoption. Unknown to her, her son Sam was raised in a physically abusive home. He became a drug addict and went through several cycles of rehab. When he was thirty-three years old he conducted a search for his birth mother. Louise was thrilled to have contact with her son. She was in a second marriage of sixteen years and had raised two children. She had settled into a middle class, orderly life and had a somewhat matronly appearance. She still had many unresolved feelings about giving up her son for adoption.

Louise went to visit her son while he was in an extended care facility. In her hotel room she massaged his shoulders which he said hurt. He and she shared a drug Sam said was used by body builders to stimulate growth of muscle tissue. The massage ended up in mother and son having sex. When Sam left the extended care facility he asked Louise if he could come and live with Louise and her husband while he found a job and got on his feet. He came and in a month's time turned the house into chaos. Part of the chaos was that Louise and Sam continued to have sex. All of which came to a stop when Louise's husband found them in bed. Sam was evicted. Louise was suicidal and abusing amphetamine. Boring middle class existence had evaporated.

In treatment Louise was stunned at how she had violated her own value system and hurt her husband whom she dearly loved. Worse in describing how sex was with her son. She provided details like she had to take off all her clothes and he remained mostly dressed. How it was more angry than passionate. Her therapist and group helped her to see that sex here was intended to degrade and humiliate her. Sam's anger at being abandoned was compounded by his physical abuse in the home in which he was raised. Sex became a vehicle for his rage. Louise said she actually knew that at the time which added to her wonderment at continuing to have sex with him. Her therapist then introduced the concept of traumatic bonding and how Sam's presence induced fear and drew power from the guilt and sadness of an old wound. This opened the window for Louise to begin to see what she was responsible for and what she was not.

What happened for Sam and Louise actually happens for many people. Anger and pain at old betrayals and abuse can be carried sexually. In Sam's case, he blamed his mother for what happened to him when in fact Louise was taking a responsible position to give him a better life. Sam's perception was different and was acted out sexually. He wanted to humiliate his mother. Yet having sex with your mother brings up another dimension of sexualized rage: perversion.

Perversion

Clinicians often think of perversion and the paraphilias as unique, rare, and weird forms of sexual expression. In that sense the clinicians are much like the general public. What helps to understand perversion is to put the perverse back into it. One of the great researchers on perversion was Robert Stoller who tells the story of his initial investigation into the pornography industry. Every pornography producer he interviewed said that

if pornography were legal and had wide spread approval, they would never have bothered to do it. In other words, the kick in making sexually explicit movies was literally taking pleasure in disapproval. Getting the culture back for its control and rigidity by putting sex in “its face.” This rebelliousness or defiance of convention is also about anger.

Individual sexual behavior is sometimes simply perverse. To perform oral sex on male strippers publicly for the wife of a public official is perverse. To barter sex for clothes around the corner from the residence of your controlling father is perverse. To have sex with your mother is more than an act of defiance. To have many affairs on your wife who lives with you in a restrictive, judgmental religious community is to break the rules. This perversity also sends a message about conventions, control, and relationships. Notice however that perversity is often a private joke. The sexual acting out is toying with the reality that the person you are angry with might find out. So in that sense it is like the gambling obsession, “will it happen this time.” And of course all of this adds to the risk and intensity of the act. Perversion works best if it is outrageous – i.e. people end up outraged. The irony here is the efforts to conceal outrageous behavior. Perversion works because the behavior is so “unusual” and the irony for clinicians is that is so common.

Obsession

Anger can fuel sexual obsession. This occurs especially in cases of betrayal and jealousy. In the situation described above where the man’s wife had affairs with black men, he literally tortured himself with the preoccupation with her behavior. This obsession was intensely sexual and overtly hostile. That it evolved into stalking behavior is very common. In the obsessive anger the rules get suspended. The stalker is justified because they keep building the case against the betraying person. In sex addiction this stalking is justified for both addicts and co-addicts. The co-addict becomes sexually obsessed as well and goes to the extremes of breaking the spouses privacy – e.g. hiring a private detective, going through personal papers and diaries, reviewing bills and credit card statements, and following the addict.

There is a website dedicated to helping people with this type of surveillance. A woman who had discovered that her husband was using their computer for cybersex brought the website to my attention. It started for her when she learned he was having affairs via email and downloading pornography. She was outraged. She found this website which was designed for husbands who cheat on the web. She got lots of ideas. So she used her

computer at work to pose as another woman and initiated a torrid chat room affair with her husband. She also installed a surveillance system on their computer which supplied a copy of everything he did on the computer. So he was acting out and at times it was with her. She was aware of all that he did. He had no idea this was going on. She learned about the software on the website. With about three thousand visitors a week, she joined participants to talk about “what their husbands have done now.” Anger, perversity, getting even, finding revenge, and being obsessive – all the components of eroticized rage are there. The charade is complete in that she continues to have sex with her husband as if nothing had changed.

Intervention

Most clients are surprised to learn that there is an anger component to their sexual behavior. There are several reasons they overlook the obvious. First, they are aware of the sex but not the anger. Patients who are in compulsive cycles or repetitive patterns are especially prone to this. Second, they have a complex web of thought distortions and rationalizations that preclude any of their own responsibility. Finally, they will need a therapist’s help to make explicit the dynamics of the family or the legacy of abuse in the patient’s life. Typically patients do not welcome these realizations at first. Over time they are seen as break through events.

There are two interventions that are extremely helpful. First, I ask my patients to make explicit what their sexual arousal template is. What experiences, scenarios, objects, preferences, beliefs, and feelings go into arousal for the patient? Is there an “ideal” fantasy which can be made explicit? The therapist then assists the client in examining arousal and where it comes from. Another exercise that is extremely helpful in this process is the “trauma egg.” A large elliptical circle is drawn on a piece of newsprint. The patient is instructed to draw or symbols or pictures of times when they felt hurt, misunderstood, anxious or abandoned. They start at the bottom of the egg with their earliest memories and fill the egg up to the current moment. It is one of the quickest ways to get at deep seated patterns and saves much therapy time. (A complete description of this process can be found in Dr. Carnes’ book *The Betrayal Bond* which can be ordered from Health Communications.)

Remember that for anger to be erotic it does not have to be pleasurable. We had a patient who was sexually abused by an older brother starting at the age of nine. As an adult she was sexually aversive or sexually “anorexic.” When she would drink alcohol she was incredibly promiscuous

but would derive no pleasure. The conquest was the goal. Anger and sex were combined but not with pleasure.

The following are issues that should be on a clinician's checklist when dealing with eroticized anger:

Sex Addiction: those addicted to compulsive sex frequently are unaware of the underlying feelings especially anger. If the clinician sees a repetitive pattern, and the client is doing what they know is self destructive and they cannot stop, sexual addiction assessment would be appropriate.

Addiction Interaction: sexual compulsion may occur in the presence of other addictions. When this happens it may a "package" as in the above example when sexual promiscuity occurred when drinking. Multiple addictions and the underlying feelings will need to be understood by the client as an interlocking set of circumstances.

Trauma: anger is one of the inevitable critical reactions to having been betrayed. Therapists often have to help clients separate legitimate anger from eroticized rage which is debilitating to them.

Trauma Bonding: traumatic bonding occurs in situations where deep feelings intensify attachment. The result is people will attach more deeply to people who are destructive to them. Think of the movie *War of the Roses*.

Stalking: patients are actually quite startled to realize their surveillance behavior as stalking. To use that word introduces a helpful dissonance into their obsessional world. They do not like to see themselves as stalkers.

Courtship and Intimacy Disorders: many patients have anger and frustration because their never learned basic relationship skills including how to initiate a relationship, resolve conflict, or make themselves vulnerable. Therapy is often remediating what the client missed.

In all of these clinical issues, therapists must keep in mind that the internet is changing everything. For those who wish to be perverse and secretive it is an ideal arena. In the upcoming issue of *Sexual Addiction and Compulsion, The Journal of Treatment and Prevention* the whole issue is dedicated to the problem of cybersex. Here are some facts which emerged in that issue:

- about six percent of internet users are having trouble with sex on the internet
- a profile of very severe problems exists for one percent of users which virtually cripples their ability to function

- forty per cent of these extreme cases are women
- most pornography is downloaded from nine to five
- one hundred thousand websites dedicated to selling sex in some way exist (not counting chat rooms, email or other forms of sexual contact on the web.)
- Two hundred sexual related websites are added every day
- Sex on the internet constitutes the third largest economic sector on the web (software and computers being first and second)
- The greatest technological innovations on the web were developed by the sex industry (video streaming being an example)

Throughout this article I have used examples involving sex on the web. For the clinician it creates a new area of intervention. Since the computer is part of the problem and the computer may be a necessary part of the client business life, the therapist will have to contract with the client with agreed upon boundaries as to computer use. These contracts will be similar to those used in eating disorders or with sex addicts. Patients need sex, food and (in a technological age) a computer. Patients agree to what they will not do, what they will avoid, and what they are working towards. In other words, just as a patient would have a food plan, or a sex plan, there would be a plan about computer use and sex. This will also require some extended discussions with your client about what goes into healthy sexuality on the net or off. Which brings us back to understanding when anger becomes eroticized.

Conclusion

Once the concept of eroticized rage is understood, therapists will see that it is much more wide spread than previously thought. Family therapists will see the couple caught in endless cycles of fighting followed by sex. People who work with prison populations will note what prisoners wives already know: release means angry sex. Addiction specialists will become aware that the disinhibiting qualities of drugs and alcohol will release sexualized anger that does not occur in a sober person. If therapists notice the traits of eroticized anger – restoration of personal parity, revenge, perversion, and obsession – they can be of extraordinary help to their clients.

In the larger drama around the abuse of power and sexual parity, eroticized rage brings a clarifying perspective. We see that the angry use of sex can be done by either sex and that victimization is not gender dependent. The problem is the abuse of power. What eroticized rage also clarifies is that independent of the power issues is the abuse of intimacy which is also

independent of gender. Power and intimacy expose are most vulnerable parts and we have to take care. We have given the abuse of power much attention in recent years. I think that we have not attended to intimacy as well. Otherwise mental health would be more of a priority in this culture. In some ways it falls to the professional counselor to help point the way – for our clients and for all of us.