



The Poverty of Conditioning Explanations for Sexual Interests: Reply to Grey (2019)

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We thank Grey (2019) for his recent Letter to the Editor. Grey found our article on furry sexuality (Hsu & Bailey, 2019) to be respectable, disagreed with us respectfully, and opened a conversation that we hope will be fruitful.

Our article reported on a study of male furies, which found that most were sexually aroused both by anthropomorphic animals (i.e., cartoon animals) and by the fantasy of being such animals. We argued further that this furies' sexuality is consistent with the concept of erotic target identity inversions (ETIIs) (Freund & Blanchard, 1993; Lawrence, 2009). ETIIs have been hypothesized to be paraphilias, in which a man's erotic target (e.g., women for heterosexual men) is internalized such that they are also sexually aroused by the fantasy of being that same kind of erotic target. We provided evidence that the sexuality of most male furies in our study was analogous to autogynophilia, paraphilic sexual arousal by the fantasy of being a woman and the prototypic ETII. Furthermore, male furies in our study were far more sexually aroused by the fantasy of being anthropomorphic animals than by the fantasy of being women, and thus, their sexuality was distinct from autogynophilia. Grey (2019) prefers the explanation that furry sexuality is a "conditioned fetish" rather than an ETII, arguing that "conditioned fetishes explain the data more simply than autoanthropomorphozophilia" (our proposed term for the relevant ETII). Grey also prefers the explanation of conditioned fetishes because he believes this explanation is less stigmatizing than that of ETIIs, which are conceptualized as paraphilias.

We do not find Grey's (2019) arguments to be persuasive. Although we disagree with him, we do so without vehemence,

for two reasons. First, we are in the early stages of research on phenomena that might be ETIIs, and it is useful to explore and debate alternative hypotheses. Second, we are not sure that the two hypotheses—ETIIs and conditioned fetishes—are incompatible with one another. There may be a role for conditioning in ETIIs, although we suspect it is a minor one.

Conditioning of Sexual Interests

We find it puzzling that Grey (2019) fails to provide citations, much less a discussion, of his central assertion that conditioned fetishes are "established" as explanations for important sexual phenomena. Rather, he merely cites Rachman's (1966) well-known study without further detail. In that study, three men repeatedly viewed an image of black, knee-length women's boots followed by images of attractive nude women. Eventually, the men produced increased genital arousal when viewing only the boots. But this demonstration falls far short of establishing an explanation for why some men fetishize women's boots. Consistent with a conditioning explanation, most men likely are first exposed to women's boots when women are wearing them. And if an attractive woman is wearing attractive boots, this might well cause some conditioning. However, the conditioning explanation leaves unanswered three main questions.

First, why boots? According to the Wikipedia page on boot fetishes: "Boots are seen as perhaps the most fetishistic of all footwear and boots may be the most popular fetish clothing attire" (Boot fetishism, 2019). Conditioning explanations generally, and certainly Rachman's (1966) study, seem to have nothing to say about the fact that boots are an especially popular object for a fetish. Indeed, some other attractive objects (e.g., jewelry) that women wear do not inspire fetishes. Second, what is the conditioning process? Rachman's study "worked," but it is entirely unrealistic as an analogue description of conditioning. Are we to believe that men develop boot fetishes only after attractive women take them

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off in front of them? Third and most important in our opinion, why do some men develop fetishes, while others do not? Conditioning explanations fail to address the fact that only a small minority of men who have seen attractive women in boots (i.e., most men in contemporary Western industrialized societies) develop boot fetishes. Unless persuasive accounts for conditioning experiences can be offered that distinguish men with and without boot fetishes, conditioning is of very limited explanatory relevance.

Importantly, the Rachman (1966) demonstration failed to achieve anything like a clinically significant fetish, in which a man is so aroused by his fetish that he spends considerable time and energy seeking sexual pleasure from it (e.g., viewing images of boots, or touching and viewing real boots). Grey (2019) suspects a number of phenomena that have previously been explained by the concept of ETIIs are better explained by conditioning, including autogynephilia. Autogynephilic males may spend thousands of dollars on women's clothing to wear for erotic purposes, and a subset goes on to alter their social identities and genitalia at great financial and personal cost (Bailey, 2003; Blanchard, 1991; Lawrence, 2013). No conditioning demonstration has come anywhere close to producing anything like these desires or motivations, and no research of which we are aware makes us think conditioning is a promising explanation. We are not idiosyncratic in our skepticism about the power of conditioning to explain variation in sexual interests. Conditioning research persists in this area, but it is a minority taste.

Despite these important limitations, we suspect that conditioning is of some (very limited) relevance in explaining phenomena like furry sexuality. In a world without cartoon animals, furies would not exist. Similarly, boot fetishes would not occur in a world without boots, and in a world where men and women switched boots, different patterns of fetishes would likely develop. (According to Wikipedia, some gay men have fetishes for boots associated with masculinity, such as combat boots and motorcycle boots [Boot fetishism, 2019]). In a world without amputees, neither acrotomophilia (sexual attraction to amputees) nor apotemnophilia (sexual arousal by the fantasy of being an amputee) would likely exist. In a world without knowledge of strangulation, no one would practice autoerotic asphyxiation (Hucker, 2011), which involves the restriction of breathing for masochistic sexual purposes and provides an illustrative anecdote: A colleague interviewed a practitioner of autoerotic asphyxiation whose interest in the activity began immediately after hearing of a suicide by hanging. The information was an important stimulus to this individual, but what proportion of us have such a reaction? This example suggests a role for environment or learning (i.e., conditioning) but a far greater role for not-yet-understood aspects of the individual. We suspect that variation in these individual factors accounts for far greater proportion of variance in explaining the development of certain

sexual interests compared with learning factors. Individual factors can account for the co-occurrence within the same individual of different, apparently unrelated, paraphilias, such as autogynephilia and masochism related to autoerotic asphyxiation (Blanchard & Hucker, 1991), or autogynephilia and masochism in general (Hsu, Rosenthal, & Bailey, 2015; Långström & Zucker, 2005; Lawrence, 2006, 2013). These individual factors may be considered susceptibility factors that make some individuals more prone to paraphilias and ETIIs than others.

Other Issues

Grey (2019) identifies as a weakness of the ETII concept that not all men thought to have ETIIs desire to be the same gender as their erotic targets. For example, some pedophilic men are only attracted to young girls but fantasize about being young boys (Hsu & Bailey, 2017). Let us say that men are in “gender alignment” when their external and internal erotic targets are of the same gender. Gender alignment in men with ETIIs is interesting to us, and indeed, we have used such alignment to support our argument that autopedophilia (sexual arousal by the fantasy of being a child) is an ETII. The finding that most autopedophilic men attracted to young girls also fantasize about being young girls is striking and difficult to explain without the concept of ETIIs (Hsu & Bailey, 2017). However, it is not clear to us that gender alignment is a necessary feature of ETIIs. Freund and Blanchard (1993) did not speak to this issue in their seminal article explaining the concept of ETIIs. Gender alignment is but one of many issues that remain unresolved in this nascent research topic.

In contrast to the concept of ETIIs, in which erotic targets are inverted to form identities, Grey (2019) suggests the alternative explanation that an identity influences the erotic target (IIET). We are unsure that we completely understand his arguments here and encourage him both to write more and to try to test his ideas empirically. We are, however, impressed by the rigidity of male sexual interests despite extreme externally imposed identity change. Specifically, natal males who are given female identities shortly after their birth for medical reasons nearly always grow up to be female-attracted, inconsistent with most others who have female identities (Bailey et al., 2016). Perhaps, Grey will object that this kind of example is not what he has in mind, but rather, identities actively embraced by individuals themselves. If so, we doubt at this time that we can have a useful debate, due to insufficient data.

One final issue is important to clarify. Grey (2019) suggests that we “might label as autopedophilic... Adult Babies and Diaper Lovers, many of whom enjoy role-playing as babies...” In fact, however, we have recently conducted a study showing that Adult Babies and Diaper Lovers do not tend to be attracted to babies and thus do not appear to represent ETIIs (Hsu, 2019),

consistent with another recent study that reached similar conclusions (Fuss et al., 2019). Not everything is an ETII. But had we not studied the possibility that Adult Babies and Diaper Lovers are attracted to babies, we would not have learned that they are not, in fact, attracted to them. Our intention is to understand what is true about the sexual minorities we study. To do so, we must sometimes ask questions that can make some people uncomfortable. We encourage others to engage similarly in thoughtful empirical research.

We close by disagreeing with Grey's (2019) implications that there is something inherently stigmatizing about ETIIs and that his various alternative hypotheses are less stigmatizing. Of course, stigma is often in the eyes of the beholder. Some individuals find autogynephilia to be an unsatisfying or distasteful way to think about themselves, and they may claim that the theory is stigmatizing (Dreger, 2008). In contrast, many others embrace the concept of autogynephilia as a welcome revelatory explanation for their lived experiences (Lawrence, 2013). Too often, however, the latter stay quiet because they are afraid of reproach from powerful activists. Importantly, the concept of ETIIs includes no implication that relevant phenomena are harmful or otherwise undesirable.

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