

Exploratory Study on Sexual Fetishism

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ABSTRACT

Paraphilias are a growing problem in the world of mental health issues, and the stigma concerning it makes it difficult to talk about. This paper discusses one of such paraphilias called fetishism in great detail, finding the reasoning and causation behind the occurrence of this phenomenon. There is a growing debate between classical conditioning, operant conditioning and association alongside deep childhood trauma, resulting in sexual fetishism.

Keywords: *Paraphilias, Sexual Fetishism, Classical Conditioning, Association*

It has been recently come to light by scientists that the prevalence of paraphilias among individuals is higher than ever through various online platforms, and even still we do not know how many more individuals out there are suffering from various different kinds of paraphilias. Most of the people suffering through paraphilias are not able to go about their life normally as this provides them with intense distress and impairs their functioning. Every creature on this planet has a sexual instinct which is to procreate with another living creature of the same species so as to preserve the existence of its species. An unhealthy amount of sexual perversion comes in the way of this natural sexual instinct, and deters men from having a normal healthy lifestyle. In our current cultural context, sexual perversion comes in various forms and is categorically represented by the DSM-IV-TR as exhibitionism, voyeurism, frotteurism, pedophilia, sexual sadism, sexual masochism, fetishism and transvestic fetishism. Through the help of the media and many crimes shows and movies, we all know the dangers of such paraphilias existing and further not being taken care of. But to take care and treat such paraphilias right we must understand deeply what they are, how their existence comes to be and then we can break any ground on how to treat it. Such paraphilias are a part of the many complexities that make up the man and hence as such are very intrinsically embedded in their being. This makes understanding them so much more difficult for people across the globe and so much more necessary to be understood by people across the globe. Even though all of the paraphilias recognized by the DSM-IV-TR are equally important to understand, this paper will be focusing on a specific paraphilia called fetishism.

“Fetishism is the paraphilia characterized by the repeated use of non-living objects and non-genital body parts in sexual fantasies, urges, or behaviours.” (Robensberg et al., 2014.)
The majority of persons having sexual fetishism is seen to be males. Before being an erotic

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concept fetish was used to describe an object with powers over other, but in 1887 Alfred Binet made use of it in an erotic context and introduced us to the concept of fetishism. He believed that fetishism occurred due to associations made with an object in a person's childhood. Association, an idea birthed by Plato and Aristotle, stirred up a lot of commotion when coming in contact with fetishism; some agreeing to it partially, some fully and some denying it completely. A sea of different theories to explain this concept arose and some even stuck by. An example for that would be a theory brought up by Magnus Hirschfeld who suggested this was the result of partial attractiveness; he believed that normally a person is never attracted to another person, but certain aspects of a person which when goes beyond healthy and becomes pathological, i.e., when that aspect becomes overvalued and detached from the person altogether, results in what we know as fetishism. Then came in Sigmund Freud who provided us with one of the most controversial theories till date which suggested that fetishism in men came from a fear of castration as when young they believed that their mother used to have a penis but had being cut-off, in turn creating an unconscious fear of their mother's genital and also unconscious sexual attraction towards their mother. This theory by Sigmund Freud was largely frowned upon because of its controversial nature but never completely dismissed. Freud's theory was further taken up and enhanced by various followers of Neo-Freudianism (a psychoanalytic approach of Sigmund Freud but embracing other factors such as social and cultural aspects that also influence a person's personality) such as Donald Winnicott who suggested that childhood habits and actions such as being attached to various childhood objects like toys, etc. can be a source of fetishism, i.e. when a child is transitioning from childhood into puberty, the object they are attached to during this phase can become sexualised leading to fetishism.

Various neurological, psychodynamic and cognitive-behavioral theories have been introduced to explain the reasoning behind fetishism but there is still a lot of disagreement and discrepancies among psychologists and the literature on these theories. There are way too many variations and different types of research suggesting different reasons for the causes of sexual fetishism. Even after there being loads of research on this topic there has been no specified reasoning or causation that has emerged and the various different kinds of research all suggesting different things can confuse and leave the causation to not be determined.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The study conducted by Koxsal, Domjan, et. explains the use of learning theory in the analysis and modification of human behavior and has been used to modify sexual disorders and also explains various differences in individuals behaviours and talks about how these conditioning experiments have been done in non-human creatures before. They conducted an experiment on Japanese quail by introducing a terry cloth shaped in such a for that it would allow copulation when the male quail was about to copulate with the female quail, and very soon the quails were conditioned to copulate with the terry cloth which established three features of fetishism which were firstly copulation with inanimate objects; secondly the continuance of this behaviour even without a live sexual partner present and thirdly to show individual differences in the acquiring of this behaviour.

The second research paper by Akio Hori takes two cases of sexual fetishism- first being panties fetishism and second being a rubber swimming cap fetishism to understand fetishism. He interviews the two people having these fetishisms to gain a better understanding on what is the deep rooted cause for their behaviour.

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The third research paper was an exploratory study to find data on the relationship between demographic variables such as age, income, etc. and if they had a kink and its coding category such as identity; nurture, negation, nature and uncertainty which were to describe the reason they thought was the origin of their kinks.

The fourth paper tries to find evidence to whether there is any grain of truth to psychodynamic theories of fetishism such as castration anxiety, separation anxiety, phallic women and the oedipus complex; and hence the author does an experimental study using German fetish filled stories on the internet and non-fetish ones and analyses them using the DAW and classifies them into six categories which are anxiety, death, mutilation, separation, guilt, shame and diffuse to identify the relevance of the theories. The findings find some theories to be true and raise doubt about others.

The fifth research paper is Pfaus', Quintana's, et. review on the paper written by Hsu and Bailey (2020) as a reply to Grey (2020) on the role of conditioning explanations for sexual interest and goes on to say that even though conditioning might be a reason for sexual interest and paraphilias but it is extremely difficult to study not just in humans but also animals because of the confusing mix of nature, nurture and its other coefficients which makes it so difficult to study the topic.

The sixth paper tries to define sexual fetishism by studying its clinical characteristics, then to find cause for sexual fetishism that occurs in humans by studying its etiologic contributing factors and then shows us various different treatment approaches for sexual fetishism such as biologic approach, psychodynamic therapy and behavioural therapy.

The seventh paper studies the role of fetishism and the claim that it is a solitary activity to find out that it can also be an interpersonal activity, then tries to find out if it is a interpersonal activity what is the preferred person for the person having sexual fetishes while conducting such acts and further to show the extent of the role which the partner has on these acts.

The eight paper reviews various different kinds of literature on the origins and reasons to participate in sexual masochism which is a part of sexual fetishes and goes on to find origin of a person's inclination to take part in such acts and what is the reasons behind the participation. It finds the eight places of origin which are "*inexplicable, inexplicable with late realization, response to inner imbalance, associated with childhood abuse, parental discipline, positive operant learning, introduced by another person and association with chronic ill*". The reasons for participation were power, pain and cognition.

The ninth paper provides us with a brief overview on the subject of sexual fetishism, its prevalence, the types and the different factors such as aetiological factors, sociocultural factors, biological factors and cultural aspects that might be cause of the problem; it also suggests a way in which this problem can be managed.

The last paper focuses on transvestic fetishism in the general population and tries to study its prevalence and how this fetishism correlates with the general population. It identifies two different groups of transvestic fetish holders and conducts an experiment by contacting them through mail to perform an interview and try to find out various reasons for the occurrence of this phenomenon.

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There have been several studies conducted on the behavioural and psychological understanding of sexual deviation in human beings since a very long time and has provided us with various different kinds of explanations for this behaviour. Sexual fetishism has been a center of curiosity for quite some time and hence such a matter of study for various researches over a period of time. Even though there are various theories and studies out there that have experimented on and provided reasons for sexual fetishism, we still do not have a clear view of the subject. This paper further aims on bringing clarity to this subject.

Research Questions

- What is sexual fetishism, how do we understand it and why does it occur?
- How do experts understand and deal with sexual fetishism and what do they have further to say about it?

METHODOLOGY

This paper aimed to get a better understanding of the psychological reasons behind sexual fetishism and its implication on a person's life and behavioural patterns. It was expected for this study to provide us with a better understanding of the psychological reasoning behind sexual fetishism and to explore every aspect it has to offer. It was supposed to provide us with not just theoretical but also practical knowledge, psychological reasoning and consequences of sexual fetishism. The only way this could be appropriately carried out was by interviewing various experts in the field that have dealt with and deal with cases of sexual fetishism. Seven psychologists; four of the psychologists had Master's in clinical psychology, two have an M.D. and one is an MBBS DPM (psychiatry), and were all interviewed to gain perspective and information on this topic.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

All experts interviewed in the study believed that sexual fetishism nowadays is seen to be occurring more frequently because people are more open and aware about their sexual needs and desires. These experts believe that at most part fetishism is a normal occurrence and harmless unless it begins to cause dysfunctional behaviour. The frequency of dysfunctional cases seen by the experts seems to be less than five percent.

Despite this, most of these experts have varying beliefs on the main causes surrounding sexual fetishism. The first psychologist believed that it occurred due to unhealthy concepts, mindset and continuation of faulty thinking; the second thought there were no specific causes to it but believed that early childhood experiences may have some kind of influence on it. Three of the psychologists believed that sexual fetishism was a result of conditioning; it is seen that the capacity for classical conditioning of erections to unusual stimuli has been demonstrated experimentally and it may be that erection is a peculiarly conditionable response, also it is believed that lack of awareness of genital response in women explains why there is a lack of fetishistic learning. One of the psychologists believed that classical conditioning might be a strengthening factor for sexual fetishism but not the cause, and that many psychoanalytical theories have been suggested to explain the causation but they are neither conclusive or absolute like the theories suggested by Sigmund Freud and Donald Winnicott. And the last believed that it could be due to causation and association of sexual arousal/excitement to a nonsexual object. And that it could also be something as simple as curiosity and interest in something, which when experienced, can result in an intense sexual experience causing the need/want of that fetish to increase or become an integral part of their lives. They believed that if the association is to be believed, it is something that has previously excited them as a child, which then turns into sexual arousal when sexual

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maturity comes into picture and that early traumatic events and attachment issues with people may lead to obsession with inanimate objects which are manifested in adolescence or after puberty. It is also more about the new meaning attached to the object. The object is conditioned to serve the desires and needs. Réification also plays a contributing role in enabling the new meaning.

It was believed by most of the experts that classical conditioning with réification and deeper childhood trauma is the most prevalent psychological reasoning behind sexual fetishism. But one also believed that operant conditioning may be the bigger culprit on hand. And one of the psychologists also believed that some people are genetically predisposed to certain behaviours and some learn and grow into them through experiences. They believed there is no particular reason for sexual fetishes, though they felt that the experiences we have have more of an effect on our preferences. But there are still differing views on whether association has a role; some believe there to be a string relationship between conditioning and association as a causation and a proportional role, while some believe that association has little role.

Five out of the above interviewed psychologists believed that sexual fetishism was the result of classical conditioning paired with association and childhood trauma. As seen in previous studies done by Koksal, Domjan, et. al. (2004) on the Japanese quail and the case studies shown by Akio and Tatsua (1973), both showed the importance and role of classical conditioning and association to help the development and survival of fetishism in both animals and human beings.

Strategic Issues

As expected, the issues that were faced while conducting the research were difficulties in communicating with the field experts and discrepancies between some of the literature and interviews. Due to the occurrence of coronavirus, the interview was conducted via an online platform, which brings to doubt whether an in-person interview would have been more insightful and knowledgeable than the one conducted by an online platform.

CONCLUSION

The results from the interviews even though still holding a little discrepancies and differences, do still throw a significant amount of light on the reasoning behind sexual fetishism. As seen through most of the literature review, causation and association with deeper childhood trauma came on top to be the most agreed reasoning and causation behind sexual fetishism occurring in individuals.

This mental illness does seem to be growing as talked about by one of the psychologists interviewed, who before used to come across only one case in six months, but has rapidly increased to one case in every twenty-five cases. It can lead to various problems in a person's life like distress in interpersonal relationships, social stigma causing low self esteem problems, dissatisfaction by other usual available means of sexual pleasure, sexual frustration, self-degradation and sexually deviant and criminal behaviour.

But as mentioned before, fetishism does not necessarily always mean harmful behaviour and can be considered healthy even if it is in a moderate amount. Sexual fetishism is something to be cautious about but needs to be accepted and not stigmatized, so that if there are people out there who need help, they can ask for it without fear of judgement. There is still a lot of

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lack in the literature revolving around is still lacking is proper knowledge and there is an intense requirement to have even more detailed study on this.

The study achieves in gaining a deeper level of knowledge and perspective on sexual fetishism, finding a not wholly accepted but widely acknowledged reasoning behind the occurrence of fetishism. It also shows us how still different in view it is, prescribing a need for a more standardized reasoning and causation; even more so the acquired need for more studies on this topic so as to help in the further development of society.

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Acknowledgement

I would like to express my gratitude towards my mentor Prof. Adwait Kapileshwari, for the immense guidance and help he has given me throughout the process of writing this research paper. I would also like to thank my university for giving me the opportunity to write this

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research paper. Lastly, I would like to thank all the interviewees that agreed to give me an interview so as to make this research possible.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Srivastava A. (2022). Exploratory Study on Sexual Fetishism. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 10(1), 338-344. DIP:18.01.029.20221001, DOI:10.25215/1001.029

Appendix:

Questions asked during interview-

1. Qualification
2. What are your views on sexual fetishism?
3. What has your experience been in dealing with such a case?
4. What is the frequency of cases of sexual fetishism that you have experienced?
5. What do you think are the main causes of sexual fetishism?
6. What do you think are the psychological reasons behind sexual fetichisms? How are they manifested?
7. Which psychological reason is most prevalent?
8. What is the relationship of conditioning and association with fetishism?
9. What are the possible consequences of sexual festishism?
10. What are your conclusive thoughts on sexual fetichisms?