

Podcast #41—Understanding the Meaning of Sexual Fetishes

When an inanimate object is a source of sexual excitement or when a part of a person, including a part of the body, is the object of intense sexual interest, we call that type of attraction fetishism. Some *thing* is related to as if it was a sexual partner. Some part stands for whole in one's sexual imagination.

Fetishism, of course, can refer to non-sexual phenomena. A fetish can refer to any time a non-living thing is imbued with live human characteristics, or whenever a living thing is reduced to the status of a thing. Karl Marx wrote about what he called the “fetishism of commodities,” by which he meant that, under capitalism, the relationships between people come to seem like relationships among things. People are assigned a monetary value, much like a consumer good. In commodity fetishism, something living is reduced to something inanimate. In sexual fetishism, one has a sexual relationship with a thing, or a part of person—say, a body part or some physical characteristic is treated as if it were a whole person.

Psychologists talk about what we call, “paraphilias,” an obscure word, by which we mean the experience of intense sexual arousal in response to atypical objects, situations, fantasies, or behaviors. Atypical—well, here, we have to

beware and take care not to pathologize or “medicalize” certain sexual interests simply because they don’t conform to heterosexual norms and conventions. But to give you examples of what we mean by “paraphilias,” such “atypical” sexual interests include particular articles of clothing (e.g. stockings, underwear), rubber, footwear (high - heeled shoes), body parts (genitals, buttocks, breasts, hair, muscles), and leather. There are also more flamboyant and unusual forms of fetishism found in things like wearing diapers or fantasies of sex with a corpse (necrophilia). All of these could be described as fetishes.

Almost anything can become a fetish if it becomes a source of especially intense interest or if it becomes a psychological requirement for sexual arousal to occur at all. So, for example, one male patient of mine had a special sexual interest in Asian women. He was anxious about his masculinity and fantasized that Asian women were temperamentally inclined to defer to men. A woman I saw needed to be with a man who was big and muscular to get aroused. For her, such a man would be immune to her own considerable aggression and power. And still another had a very rare and unusual sexual preference which was to have sex with a large stuffed animal, a syndrome called “plushophilia.” He normally saw

women as being cold and harsh and a soft sexual partner made it safer to get aroused.

Now, it might seem like fetishism is simply a label we apply to any even slightly unusual sexual interest. And it's true that there are probably elements of fetishism that can be found in most people's sexual fantasy life and repertoire. Still, there are certain issues, certain psychological dynamics that seem to underlying many fetishes and I would like to talk about these dynamics today.

Let's take the most well known and classic sexual fetish which is the arousal that some men feel about women in high heel shoes—you know, pumps, spike heels or boots with a high heel. How is it that such shoes, an inanimate thing, can produce excitement? What is the meaning of a having a sexual relationship with a shoe or with a woman only if she is wearing such a particular shoe? The answer can only be found in the unconscious minds of these men. Having seen several such men in psychoanalysis, here's what I've found. The woman in heels appears to the man to be strong, even dominant. The heels make the woman wearing them subliminally appear to be tough and even a bit dangerous.

Now, why should that be arousing? The answer is that such depictions of female strength and power reassure the man that she can't be hurt, that he doesn't have to worry or

feel guilty about her, that he doesn't have to feel responsible for her welfare. Such men generally inhibit their libidos because of their unconscious guilt and worry about hurting woman and the experience of a woman now seen, because of the shoes, to be strong, relieves him of this inhibition and therefore enables him to get excited.

As I explained in a prior podcast, people generally inhibit their sexual desires because of the chilling effects of guilt, worry, shame, and helplessness. Whatever helps a person counteract or negate these feelings will therefore be arousing. The logic is simple: if you lift a sexual inhibition, the excitement and arousal that is being inhibited can surface.

This is exactly what happens in the man's mind when he sees a woman in high-heeled shoes.

In fact, if you think about it, if a man represses his sexuality because he has inordinate worries about offending or hurting or otherwise burdening his sexual partner with his selfish desires, then experiencing the other person as an object, as something two-dimensional, is an antidote to this repression. Consider all the ways that men objectify women (and, of course, this same dynamic applies to gay men and lesbians as well), or become obsessed with a part of the female body to the exclusion of the whole person. Here's the unconscious logic: you don't have to worry or feel guilty about

hurting a thing, do you? A thing has no inner life of feelings that can be wounded. Thus, objectification, the process at the core of fetishism, is often a part of sexual arousal.

Consider the various ways that objectification operates in modern sexual life. Objectification can operate in relation to another person's temperament, his or her style or general appearance, every bit as much as it applies to a specific part of that person's body. The defining feature is that some quality is abstracted from the whole person and made an object of excitement. Examples: Someone might be especially and intensely aroused by perceptions that the other person is young—youth becomes a fetish--or perhaps that the person appears to be a "bad boy" or "bad girl." Perhaps the excitement comes from the perception that the other person is in need of help or rescue, or seems slovenly and used up, or that they seem self-contained and invulnerable. All of these perceptions are drenched in fantasy of course. They involve becoming sexually interested in someone because of that person's emotional or social appearance. That characteristic, that partial sliver of the other person, is treated as if it was the whole person for purposes of sexual attraction.

When we get turned on by a part of someone, or by an inanimate something, then it's only a problem if it interferes with one's life, including with one's relationships. BUT-it must

be remembered that fantasies are not reality, and that getting excited by a part of someone or by your inferences about who they are based on a superficial interpretation, might not always be the best foundation for a fulfilling and successful love life. Still, it's probably the case that elements of fetishism and objectification are found in all of us at least some of the time. The challenge is to understand these elements, their limitations, and their meaning. When it comes to sex, that's all we can probably do.