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CLARIFICATION

Exhibitionists, so much inhibition... ☆

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Management

Summary Sexual exhibitionism is a form of human behavior that surprises and challenges us. The French Criminal Code punishes this offence in the section devoted to sexual aggressions. It is indeed a hetero-aggressive action without direct contact with the victim. In the eyes of the public, the perpetrator of such aggressions is often mocked or seen as “crazy”. In profiling the personality of an exhibitionist or of this particular behavior itself, a very different structure appears, where the scopophilic functions used (show something off to be seen), result from a common characteristic in all these individuals: inhibition. By realizing this and taking it into account, we can improve prevention at both a primary level (education) and secondary level (management to avoid repeat offences).

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Introduction

In its etymology, the word exhibitionist comes from exhibit, from the latin *Exhibere*, meaning “to present, to show”.

Historically, Theophrastus was the first to coin the name, in 300 BC. Legally, England was the first country to condemn the offence in 1824, in the *Vagrancy Act* (public hatred of thieves, vagabonds, rogues, etc.). After that, it wasn't until 1877 that Lasegue (*Lasègue, 1877*) defined it

specifically as: “a person revealing certain parts of his body, but going no further”. At the time, he highlighted the “hetero-aggressive action without contact with the victim”, without taking account at that time of the psychological profile of the perpetrator.

From a clinical standpoint, it is important to note that not all actions of sexual exposure are necessarily related to an exhibitionist-type disorder, and at the same time, not all cases of exhibitionism necessarily include acts of sexual exposure.

The International Classification of Diseases (ICD-10) refers only to behaviors, recurrent or persistent tendencies to expose one's genitals, without desiring or attempting to obtain closer contact; it states that these are maneuvers accompanying the exposure in general, and in some cases can be limited to times of emotional stress, disappearing for long periods of time.

The DSM-5 specifies that exhibitionism is one of the eight main paraphilia, and its diagnosis requires observation of a

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clinically visible suffering, a long-term tendency for more than six months and the non-consenting involvement of victims.

Exhibitionism is therefore more than just a straightforward behavior of sexual exposure as defined by law, and describes a real and identified category of pathology, meaning that many perpetrators of acts of sexual exposure are not diagnosed as exhibitionists.

Exhibitionism, nudity and the Law

Exhibitionism

Today, exhibitionism is a form of sexual violence punished by law. Before it was included in the French Criminal Code, sexual offences, assimilated with sin, were considered as an attack on the Divine Order and Family order, and as such were morally condemned by the clergy, but to a varying degree depending on the customs in each province. In the New Criminal Code, in force since 01/03/1994, section III of chapter II (“personal injury or physical or mental harm to another human being”) in Book II (“crimes and offences against others”), called “Sexual aggressions”, article 222-22 states that “a sexual aggression is any sexual attack committed with violence, force, threat or surprise”. Article 222-32 states that “sexual exposure to other people in a public place” (adding that “the offence of sexual exposure presumes that the body or part of the body voluntarily exposed to the view of others is or appears to be naked”), is punished with a prison sentence of one year and a 15,000 euros fine.

Exhibitionism today is an offence considered to be a sexual aggression in the broad sense of the term, in the same category as rape, and includes the following elements: sexual exposure (an evolving concept with the change in morals, notably regarding the representation of the part of the body considered to have a sexual vocation), deliberately forced upon the sight of another person, in a public place or even private place, whilst the moral element is suggested by the fact that the action is deliberate (since article 121-3 states that “there can be no crime or offence without deliberate intention to commit one”, except for certain listed offences, which do not include indecent exposure); indeed the intention to offend the decency of others has to be proven, and this is not always an easy task (in fact, nudity is no concern of the courts as long as it is practiced in places provided for the purpose).

Nudity in our society

Article 222-32 of the French Criminal Code was drafted in such a way as to avoid including “naturalist” behavior as sexual exposure, since nudity alone is not an offence. Many sociologists have developed some theories on sexuality and nudity. Queer theory, work on gender identity and sex are evolving (see Marie-Hélène Bourcier, Beatriz Preciado, etc.). Exhibitionism requires an element of opposition, provocation or the intention to draw attention from the media.

The invention of the webcam has given rise to new types of exhibitionist behaviors by members of the online community, but also new exposure attitudes in people’s

private lives, since the reassuring distance established by the computer network allows the expression of all sorts of exhibitionist urges. Social media are also popular for such behaviors and provide interesting subjects of reflection for our sociologists.

Exhibitionism and mental health

Exhibitionism can often seem meaningless, difficult to understand, somewhere between shame, surprise, desire, guilt and so on. Sex draws the eye; exhibitionism raises the question of nudity in our societies, the need to show oneself, the importance of the body, its exposure, how it is used. It becomes, like its over-categorization, an entity at the borders between public health and justice.

The classic definition of exhibitionism in the literature is as follows: “an urge to show one’s genitalia in order to obtain a great degree of satisfaction.” With regard to clinical psychology, we cannot validate such a limited definition, which is in fact, quite inexact. The elements that everyone seems to agree with today, both in the literature and in clinical practice are as follows:

- deliberate exposure: there is no physical nor psychotic disorder, and the action was not initiated by alcohol or any other psychoactive substance; at the most the alcohol or substance was a facilitator—intentionally (consciously or not), explaining why alcohol or drugs are considered as an aggravating factor in the eyes of the Law;
- repeated exposure, in an *impulsive* manner some would say, but the term *compulsive* seems more appropriate;
- imposed exposure, i.e. without the consent of the victim (or of the “object” if we look at it from the exhibitionist’s side) who was not expecting it, had not sought it, and feels intimidated by it;
- inappropriate exposure: the place and circumstances of such an action are generally seen as unacceptable.

There have been very few studies on the population of exhibitionists as sex-offenders (Firestone et al., 2006), resulting in the fact that the medical and social-judiciary means available tend to be focused most often on the so-called “more serious” perpetrators of sexual violence; those that cause physical injury to their victims. In addition, the victims’ experience should be taken into account; this type of aggression is often trivialized whereas it can sometimes be experienced by the victim as extremely violent, firstly because of the element of surprise, associated with the incongruity of such sexual crudity outside of any intimate context, but also through fear of physical injury.

Management

Exhibitionism is not to be taken lightly, bearing in mind that this is the sex-offender population that reports the most suffering from acting out, explaining why they comply more easily with treatment and why it is effective.

Amongst all the different populations encountered in forensic psychology, the exhibitionists are the most immature and neurotic. They are hardly ever individuals with perverse personality traits (in the sense of manipulation

and seduction, giving priority to the temptation of control), and only very rarely people with psychopathic personalities (in the sense of intolerance of frustration and impulsivity). Although a few exhibitionists can have this type of personality, most of this population are immature neurotics—according to Roland Coutanceau’s classification (Coutanceau and Smith, 2010)—presenting major relationship inhibitions and emotional immaturity.

Six personality types would appear to be present in exhibitionist behaviors:

- the “inhibited”, characterized by neurosis and phobia, but also by seduction;
- the “hostiles”, described as misogynous and aggressive, adepts of submission;
- the “compulsives”, set, pervaded, loaded with cognitive distortions;
- the “existentials”, acting out of playful provocation, emptiness, boredom;
- the “public masturbators”, for whom the victim is chosen purely by chance, linked to a stressful situation for the perpetrator;
- the “polymorphic perverts”, with disorganized sexuality, and borderline personality history.

Exhibition vs Inhibition

In most cases, indecent exposure is ironically a problem of inhibition. Inhibition with regard to women, with regard to seduction; inhibition in their relationships with other people in general. These subjects can therefore have the fantasy, sometimes in a rather confused manner that exposing themselves will be a method of approach to arouse desire, attraction, and a possible start to an intimate relationship.

As for the exhibitionist’s personality, there are several characteristics that come back frequently in the field of the inhibition:

- the depressive dimension in exhibitionist subjects is certainly correlated with the representation of a defective Ego, impotent and submissive. The result is omnipotent control in their attitude, but also compulsions and capacity to fantasize;
- the operating climate, i.e. based on factual and rigid rationalization, totally lacking in symbolism, and de facto, emotionally indifferent;
- the intensity of the internal struggle, within the subject about his action, very reminiscent of the struggle experienced by an addict who wants to stop taking his drug. Struggle between reason and compulsion, the principle of pleasure and that of reality. The Ego is being torn between the Id and the Superego;
- behavior that inhibits or strengthens one of the mental structures that inhibits or facilitates the exhibitionist behaviour alongside the subject’s internal struggle. This therefore reflects the subject’s constant issue of

inhibition: the Ego, urges but also, when acting on them, the Superego. When he is not inhibited in society and in his relationships with others, he is inhibiting his Superego in order to expose himself. It is interesting to note that although the subject is passive in his daily life (in his relationships with others) due to his inhibitions and his introversion, he becomes active in the relationship he is establishing with the other person during the exposure, by imposing the view of his genitalia upon his victim. The impotence and deficiency suffered by the Ego gives way to the omnipotence and the control of the ideal Ego.

Conclusion

Exhibitionist behavior is disconnected from sexuality. The subjects are mainly trying to relieve internal tensions, but the sexual dimension of these tensions is not the main focus. Exposure of their genitals would appear to be a call for attention and recognition from the other person for these subjects who are most often characterized by feelings of worthlessness. When the opposite effect takes place, the subject loses grip and runs away... He feels ashamed and ridiculous, sometimes to such an extent that he wants to disappear altogether, with regrets, sometimes with feelings of hatred for the object, again often reinforcing the social inhibition from which he suffers.

Given that the sexual urge is not directed towards the object, this would imply that his urge is an asexual and anobject urge (hence, the anonymous and interchangeable nature of the object). Therefore, the exhibitionist’s behavior is not motivated by urges nor by sex, but rather by something narcissistic, disconnected from sexuality, with no specific object. This hypothesis, highlighting the scopoc functions of the human being, is also supported by the relationship that the subject has with the object, a functional relationship, since he is using the object as an extension of himself, exploiting the object’s ability to see, and without her consent, to manipulate her and make her his mirror for narcissistic reassurance (Bonnet, 1981).

Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interest.

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