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# The New Sexual Landscape and Contemporary Psychoanalysis



**KARNAC**

*firing the mind*

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## INTRODUCTION

### On the back of the tiger

*You can't experience the taste of heaven  
with your clothes on.*

Patient X

Once while administering the Rorschach Test to a young male millennial, Dr Knafo listened closely to his florid descriptions of the many beautiful things he saw in the ink blots – blooming gardens, billowing cumulus clouds, sparkling fountains, beautiful butterflies, and so forth.\* Though suspicious of the benignity of his projections, she withheld comment. As the patient turned to leave, he looked back at her and said, “Can I ask you a question?”

“Of course,” she replied.

“Why did you show me all those dirty pictures?”

\* All clinical material in this volume, unless otherwise specified, comes from Dr Knafo's practice.

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Later he confessed he had seen human and animal genitals, both alone and engaged in sexual acts, in all ten cards. This patient's telling moment illustrates the universal conflict about human sexuality. The pictures are dirty, the patient says. But if they depict only genitals and sexual acts, why are they dirty? Perhaps he thinks so because they are both animal and erotic acts, fraught with longing, conflict, anxiety, secrets, and dread of weakness and vulnerability. Sex is not simply what we do; it is what we mean. Moreover, the motives behind our sexual acts are too numerous and nuanced to be fully understood and certainly more than can ever be remembered. Psychoanalysis has taught us that erotic lives are informed by our earliest relationships with caregivers, siblings, and even friends, especially the hidden aspects – “the stuff under the table”, as one of Dr Knafo's patients described it.

Sex is “hush-hush”, in that it keeps itself in the form of secrets remembered, secrets forgotten, and secrets that occur before memories can even be formed – *virtual* secrets. The closed doors be-

hind which sex usually takes place are first found in the human psyche. Discussion about sex often creates discomfort. When the topic is introduced to a young person, it is frequently sanitised as “the facts of life”, “the talk”, or “the birds and the bees”, or explained in a film on sexual biology. “To think I began as a gooey inseminated piece of slime and was born an inch north of an anus! The insult begins with conception! That alone is enough to hate my parents,” shouted one of Dr Knafo’s patients in a fit of existential rage.

And even when people talk about sex, they rarely speak from the heart and the gut. Can we admit to another in a heartfelt manner our strongest desires and excitements, how they are often linked to the most forbidden enactments, and how, at its hottest, the best sex goes off like a bomb we are unaware of but carry within? (“I did things I never thought I could do! Not just sexual things, other things too . . .”) How do we tell one another that behind the mask of our past and culture is often a frustrated “dirty” animal who might risk an entire life

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and reputation for a few moments of sexual bliss? Some contemporary examples may come to mind: Bill Clinton, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Tiger Woods, and David Petraeus, to mention a few. How do we speak about fantasies, urges, and acts that would shame us to share? (“I am a six-foot, 200-pound macho man who fantasises about wearing female lingerie while romping among naked transgender people. Let me tell you exactly how it feels to think about this, what I do when I think about it, and what it might feel like to do it. Would I do it? Would I? No. Well maybe. I don’t know. It depends.”)

Where does such a dialogue fit within the ambit of contemporary culture? Where does it fit within psychoanalysis? We speak as persons, not animals, often consciously cut off from what our bodies are saying to one another, naturally cloaked in the language and symbols of our civilisation, which aims to banish the animal reeking of naked desperation – wild, unpredictable, dirty, and stained by aging and death. We are that cunningly clever animal that escapes itself by immersion in

a symbolic world of meaning that seems to transcend the body.

On rare occasions, when adults attempt to speak openly about sex, their body language and tone of voice change remarkably, so that even if an observer did not understand the language they were speaking, that person would most likely know sex was the topic of discussion. The signs of risky conspiratorial camaraderie would be evident: the sly grin, the nervous laughter, the alert absorption keenly monitoring oneself and others' reactions. Heads might lean towards each other if things are going well. Or perhaps some in the group might look uncomfortable, embarrassed, or slightly confused. For most people, sex is a subject they don't clearly understand, even if they are much preoccupied with it, consciously or unconsciously. Sex may sometimes seem as if it has a mind, life, and language all its own. Clearly, sex, like death, is a problem for all human beings. While some cultures are "sexually liberated", and every sexual revolution expands the way we view and judge sexuality, they all ultimately fail



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because the chthonic, chaotic, and irrational core of human sexuality escapes definitive capture by any theory. Therefore, we often find ourselves speaking of the “mystery” of sex. As Sagan and Druyan (1992) aptly noted, “the nearly maniacal devotion to sex and love” exhibited by plants, animals, and microbes is pervasive. “It cries out for explanation. What is all this in aid of? What is the torrent of passion and obsession about? Why will organisms go without sleep, without food, gladly put themselves in mortal danger for sex?” (p. 143).

Such obsession is evident in today’s sexually saturated culture, where one in six internet visits is to a porn site (Anthony, 2012). Yet, over the last twenty-five years, initiation of sexual intercourse among young people is beginning at later ages. Specifically, the number of American high school students having sex dropped from 54% to 40% between 1991 and 2017, and both young people and baby boomers are having less sex than previous generations did at the same age (Julian, 2018). A major British study found that couples

report having less sex than they did ten years ago (Wellings & Johnson, 2013).

Sex seems to become even more thorny the more scientists and social scientists learn. For example, some are now claiming that psychoanalytic theory hides from the primacy of sex, neglecting it in favour of attachment and relational concerns (Fonagy, 2006; Green, 1995). Adding to the growing complexity of the sex picture is people's airing of "dirty laundry" long consigned to the hampers of cultural discretion: for example, the pervasive harassment and abuse, mostly of women, revealed by the "Me Too" movement and the ongoing revelations of widespread sexual abuse and rape, primarily of children, by Catholic clergy. The cover-ups of the Catholic Church are a little ironic, considering that official Church dogma deems birth control to be a sin. Meanwhile, religion and right-wing politics are being used to step up repressive attacks on abortion rights and the lifestyles of the LGBTQ+ community. On a more quotidian level, sexual dysfunction continues to be common

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in marriage and long-term relationships. Perhaps it is too early to hoist the flag of victory over repression, and perhaps psychoanalysis needs to return to its founding concern with sexuality.

In fact, perverse sexual dynamics are at play in both erotic and everyday life. We do not ride atop the sexual tiger, simply directing it with our will, as much as we wilfully resist being carried along on its back. Every relationship we have carries an erotic undercurrent, clearly evident in the sexual taboo. If it must be forbidden, then it must be possible. Andrea Celenza (2014) notes that the question, “Why can’t we be lovers?” is asked and calibrated in every relationship, regardless of age, gender, role, or context. “After all,” she says, “*our unconscious is never married*, and there are no boundaries or limits in our imagination” (p. 61).

This boundless imagination is evident in how the tech revolution has altered sexual and erotic norms over the last two decades. Innumerable web-based sexual outlets, unimaginable several years ago, now exist along with powerful online

communities that have aided the widespread acceptance – backlash notwithstanding – of homosexuality, bisexuality, asexuality, pansexuality, celibacy, sadomasochism, virtual relationships, and polyamory. With these changes a new dimension has been added to human sexuality – *digisexuality*, or the attraction to and sexual interaction with sex bots and technologically enhanced sex objects, in which the technology itself is part of the excitement.

At the heart of the digital sex revolution is the internet, which has changed us and our world in ways we do not yet fully understand. Right to privacy, information exchange, education, work, media, politics, economics, warfare, social control, world connectivity, truth, culture, desire, and human reality itself – everything has been changed by the web. Like the mind, the internet has an area that is open and accessible, and a much larger area – the Deep Web or Dark Web – whose offerings include drugs, guns, contract killing, fraud services, and more. Fantasies are a mere keystroke away, including malignant ones involving catfishing,

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cyberbullying, rape porn, child porn, and torture and murder porn. People can also easily access hateful online cultures born of sexual frustration and social isolation. For example, a subset of “incels” (a moniker for “involuntary celibates”) has formed an online community of white men who define themselves as unable to find a romantic or sexual partner despite desiring one. They advocate for violence against good-looking women and their male partners, whom they dehumanise as “Stacys” and “Chads” and “Tyrones” (black men whom they claim are “stealing” all the women). A smaller, even more extreme group within the incel community has adopted as their patron saint a mass murderer named Elliot Rodger, a frustrated incel who left behind a 100,000-word misogynist manifesto (Branson-Potts & Winton, 2018). The internet, both a boon and a curse, has not merely changed our culture – it has hijacked it.

The internet and associated technologies have digitised polymorphous perversity, creating an alternative adult world. The parents’ bedroom

door never closes, and the online primal scene is open for all to witness and enjoy (Lemma, 2017). Pornhub, the most popular internet pornography site, served 92 million people per day in 2018 (Henry, 2018). Aside from providing porn of every kind instantly, technology offers a cornucopia of hook-up apps, cybersex, and sex toys, such as sex dolls and sex robots. Artificial-intelligence (AI) expert David Levy predicts marriage to robots will become routine in a few more decades (Choi, 2008; Levy, 2007). There already exist strong online communities of men who have bonded over their love of sex dolls and their lives with them (Knafo, 2015).

Sex and erotic life claiming so much digital real estate is no surprise, although the impact of this trend on norms continues to be surprising. This trend provides a strong indication for why sex should be restored as a central interest in the psychoanalytic enterprise. In this volume we provide a synthesis of the most important and useful psychoanalytic ideas about sexuality and erotic life

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as a lens through which to view and understand major changes occurring in the sexual landscape. We organise these changes under four broad headings: fluidity and multiplicity in gender; new forms of sexuality and mating; internet pornography; and erotic technology. Bringing together theory, research, and clinical vignettes, we show how sex and the erotic permeate social life and are, therefore, necessarily bound up in the tech revolution. We aim to alert psychoanalysts and other mental health practitioners to these facts in the hope of turning more of their attention towards this new sexual landscape and its effects on patients. We strongly believe psychoanalysis is uniquely positioned to lead these efforts.

### THE SHIFT AWAY FROM SEXUALITY

Over the last several decades, psychoanalysis has shifted its focus from sexuality to object relations and attachment theory, thus abandoning the complex intrigues of human sexuality as the

central element of Freud's theory (Fonagy, 2006; Green, 1995). Shalev and Yerushalmi (2009) argue that, despite the apparent attenuation of conflict between sexuality and society, psychoanalysis has moved away from sex for three reasons: (1) the inherent discomfort aroused by the subject (and experienced by both therapist and patient); (2) puritanical reactions stirred up by HIV/AIDS; and (3) the explosion of sexual harassment lawsuits.

Noting the decline in language specific to sexuality, concurrent with the rise of relational discourse in psychoanalytic literature, Fonagy (2006) opines that "although we may pay lip service to the continued importance of sexuality and use vociferous rhetoric to assert its primacy in our thinking, our writings and probably our daily practice belie this" (p. 1). His analysis surveys a theoretical progression in psychoanalytic theory, which shifted the focus from sexuality to object relations, problematised drive theory, ignored the link between attachment and sexuality, and reinterpreted sexual content as a defence against relational pathology. In other words, psycho-



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analysis gradually replaced the notion that sexuality is the foundational subsoil from which diverse relational phenomena flourish with the idea that sexuality defends against relational and existential difficulties. The former view implies we ride the tiger, trying to steer it as best as we can, often failing, while the latter suggests we use the tiger to distract ourselves and others away from paying attention to pressing and difficult issues. As we shall see, both views have validity. Like Shalev and Yerushalmi (2009), Fonagy (2006) cites analytic discomfort and resistance to explicit sexual discourse as possible factors in the shift away from sexuality within the psychoanalytic frame. Perhaps Freud himself deserves some blame for this shift because, despite the fact that he first recognised the prevalence of child sexual abuse, he later minimised it, attributing some of it to fantasy (Masson, 1984). Nonetheless, Freud (1905d) was the first to recognise the universality of perversity in human sexuality and its beginnings in childhood.

Sex and erotic life are central and often perverse preoccupations of human beings. A recent

and irrefutable demonstration of this core truth is found in Brett Kahr's groundbreaking book, *Who's Been Sleeping in Your Head* (2007), which analyses the largest study of sexual fantasies ever completed, including 23,000 men and women from the ages of eighteen to ninety. Early on in his work, Kahr notes aggression and perversity in human sexuality: "Many fantasies contain strong imagery of sadism, masochism, and other forms of harm. If any one of us could manage to put our more aggressive fantasies into practice, we would end up in prison" (p. 63). The fulfilment of erotic desire is as much a motivator of human behaviour as is obtainment of love and attachment, especially when one admits erotic life is not confined to the bedroom. To express power in interaction, to seduce, to resist, to surrender, to penetrate, to contain, to join with, to pervert – these actions form an erotic spine nested in all social activity (Knafo & Lo Bosco, 2017).

We see sex and love as "frenemies" working with as well as against each other. We agree with Eagle (2005), who describes sexual desire and

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human attachment as rooted in two instinctive motivational systems, emerging from two separate but overlapping neurological networks and shaped by evolutionary factors that support individual survival and reproduction. Sexual desire can work in support of attachment, but it can also work solely for its own fulfilment. From an evolutionary standpoint, this makes complete sense; if sex only supported love (i.e., attachment), it would have weakened the chances of the human species surviving through the long time span of prehistory. Though attachment and love may hold the species together, sex and reproduction drive it forward (Chapais, 2008).

Our primary concern in this work is with the latter – sex, the primordial activity, and erotic life, its humanisation. We are particularly interested in how erotic life is being reconfigured by the tech revolution. Though no complete theory of sexuality exists, a few powerful psychoanalytic ideas will guide our journey:

1. The primordial sexual instinct is made complex as *erotic life* through the function of human

consciousness. The interplay between awareness and unconscious knowledge, between the self and its hidden substrate, and between the unremembered past and the present moment it seeds is what creates the erotic dimension. Whether in the form of a fantasy, an urge, or an explicit act, erotic life is furnished and informed by unconscious embodiment.

2. The erotic dimension is shaped in great part (we do not know how much) by early experiences that often include some degree of trauma. Sex between human beings is not only about the desire for love and union, physical enjoyment, and offspring. Sex is also about psychologically expressing and working out the conflict associated with forbidden desires and historical suffering. It is about breaking limits, exorcising trauma, recovering the impossible object (usually signified by the mother), making reparation with embodied memories and figures, and taking revenge for such memories on such figures. From a larger existential

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perspective, sex is a fist fight with death, not simply because it can lead to new life, but because it can take us beyond the self. The overdetermined erotic dimension can express hatred as well as love and enshrine death as well as celebrate life.

3. Perversity is a key feature of human sexuality. Lust, with its primitive and aggressive urges, is in conflict with the norms of civilised society. Law and rule attempt to contain sexual desire within normative boundaries, but those boundaries historically have been and will continue to be violated. Human desire is restless, and people are eager for new thrills, especially forbidden thrills and experiences that unconsciously re-enact past defeats, humiliations, and previous overwhelming occurrences that remain unprocessed. Social and sexual perversity spans a spectrum, from benign to malignant. As we have argued elsewhere (Knafo & Lo Bosco, 2017), what energises innate sexual perversity is not merely

personal trauma but the existential framework of human life, the “traumatic context” – the saturation of loss, sickness, aging, and mortality.

4. Since conception ensures death, sex makes life an existential *fort/da* game played only once but in reverse – here now and then gone forever. This “game” establishes the limits of human existence. The finality of death is perhaps a more difficult problem today than it was in previous eras: many cultures are no longer tethered to a belief in God’s divine plan and the promise of immortality. Thus sex, in its wild and private nature, is easily forged into a weapon against physical, mental, and cultural limits. It is enlisted in the fight against limitation, the transgression of boundaries, and the hunt for novelty.
5. Human beings are inherently ambivalent about sex and erotic life. On the one hand, sex belongs to the animal body. (I have genitals. How disgusting! How mortal!) On the other hand, it is through our sexuality that the hu-

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man self wields (erotically charged) power. (I have genitals and I can symbolise them. How wonderful! How transcendent!) The inherent perversity of this conflict is ironic: while we enter the world through sex and desire, the result (birth) ensures we will perish. We are both an animal and human self. No amount of “sexual liberation” can “solve” this conflict, or resolve the conundrum that sex creates attachment while death destroys it.

6. The relation of sex to gender is similar to that of sexuality and attachment. Specifically, sex and gender are connected, but they can also function independently of each other. Gender is not determined solely by biology; it is also constructed by culture. Fluidity in gender and sexuality has existed from our polymorphous beginnings.

## Introduction

### APPLYING PSYCHOANALYSIS TO TODAY'S SEXUAL MILIEU

Because it has historically engaged in a nuanced exploration of erotic life, psychoanalysis is uniquely positioned to examine the sexual sea change resulting in recent cultural and technological revolutions. Perversion theory, a crucial subset of psychoanalysis, explains the motivation underlying human sexuality and its strange enactments, even those with a malignant quality. Yet, there is no hard line between perversion and “normal” sexuality, as there is none between sexual and social existence. In archetypal opposites – cooperation and competition, invitation and seduction, trust and betrayal, assistance and exploitation, forgiveness and revenge – and everything in-between, the use of genitalia is optional. Moreover, while psychoanalysis illuminates universals (the avoidance of threat, the quest for happiness, the fear of death, the profound influence of childhood, or the split between consciousness and unconsciousness), it still remains focused on



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individuals and their relational lives. This is especially true when psychoanalysts are treating people who discuss their sex lives, or lack thereof, or when patients involve their analysts in their sex lives. We believe that what we cover in this volume will have clinical applications for analysts practising across the new sexual landscape.

The first two chapters explain the changes that have taken place in sexuality within the last few decades, in which the view of gender has transitioned from fixed and binary (male or female) to fluid (male and female mixed and blended, nullified or transcended in a variety of combinations). Previously a theory of sexuality was conceived primarily in a heterosexual paradigm, but today many terms have been added to account for a wider array of behaviours, identities, and sexual orientation and mating: homosexuality, bisexuality, pansexuality, and even that shunned outlier, celibacy. Psychoanalysis now operates in a new world.

Chapter 3 covers the explosion of internet pornography and its aftermath, and we raise im-

portant questions analysts must now consider: Is there an implicit structure that can be discerned in the relationship between pornography and its consumers, which, in turn, can help us understand the effects pornography has on the user? What does the pornographic imagination tell us about human perversity? How might early exposure to pornography affect a child's sexual and social development? How does internet pornography addiction develop? In what other ways is the mainstreaming of porn affecting society?

Chapter 4 addresses the growing cybersex trend – specifically, sex with online partners and sex with inanimate partners. Technology both mediates the connection with human partners and sometimes replaces human partners with devices, dolls, and robots. Those who engage with robots or a similar technology call themselves digisexuals and robosexuals (McArthur & Twist, 2017).

Psychoanalysts are challenged with understanding new forms of sexuality so that they may effectively treat people having difficulties. A brief

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epilogue suggests a wide-angle view and underscores the importance of psychoanalytic theory and practice in understanding and treating patients who are negotiating new sexual and social terrain.

Before moving on we must address a sensitive issue. In writing about the controversial subjects of gender and sexuality, we are skating on proverbial thin ice. Since Freud's time, anyone who has done so has invited attack. On the one hand, such attacks may seek to set the record straight in representing a wide variety of gender categories and sexual preferences and in lobbying for non-judgmental treatment. On the other, some attacks may want to establish new dogmas and shut down dialogue between and among competing points of view.

There are multiple causes for the desexualisation of psychoanalysis, but key among them is the resistance and defensiveness surrounding human sexuality. Despite increased openness to some conversation about sex, sex and gender remain inherently problematic aspects of being human. Sex is a problem because when it is transformed into a

symbolic erotic act, it becomes charged with various and often conflicted meanings. Gender is a problem because it is bound up in the formation of human identity (self), whose meanings are also various and often conflicted. These built-in conflicts, enacted within the social body, ensure that the sexual landscape will continue to change, as noted in Mark Blechner's clever pun *Sex Changes*, the title of his 2009 book on social and sexual transformation.

In this brief text, we offer some ideas that have been put forward about sexuality, gender, identity, and technology and advance our own ever-evolving views. We readily acknowledge the diversity, fluidity, and multiplicity that exist in today's world. Yet we also recognise that gender and sexuality are very individual expressions, no matter the "group" one might belong to. Therefore, rather than generalise, we speak of trends, and those trends are constantly changing.

Sex is exciting, disturbing, and confusing. As the primordial power of life, sex aptly reflects the conflicted complexity of what it means to be human.