

"Gerontophilia": A Forensic Archaism

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Abstract

This review briefly discusses (1) coinage of the term and early history of the notion of gerontophilia; (2) its consecutive conceptual frameworks; finally, (3) implications for contemporary, wider discussions around the forensics of paraphilia and sex crime.

Keywords: gerontophilia, paraphilias, review, historical perspectives

Gerontophilia has often been taken to denote a "paraphilic" interest in the elderly and in forensic contexts might be fitted into the diagnostic slots of DSM-5 "Other Specified" or "Unspecified Paraphilic Disorder" (APA, 2013, p. 705). Neither the APA's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* nor the WHO's *International Classification of Diseases* has ever included specific reference to it, however. Definitions vary, case histories are very sparse, and medical historical reflection remains to be written. In news reports the term may be simply applied to any suspected serial offender against the elderly (e.g., BBC, 2000). A PubMed search on the term offers little beyond three (two English) rather arguable case reports (published 1959, 1991, and 2011). Only one (Spanish, and rather inefficient) review article was encountered (Hernández, 2011). Even sporadic reviews on sexual offending against the elderly can be seen abstaining from tackling the issue head-on (e.g., Ball, 2005, p. 129).

Case reports often generate more questions than answers. A letter in *The Lancet* (Monfort, Villemur, Lezy, Baron-Laforet & Dröes, 2011), for instance, reports on three men aged 68, 82, and 85 years, who "had had sexual intercourse or had played sexual games with frail and cognitively impaired older women" aged 85 to 104 years. Given that the men turned out to have been convicted for or were rumored to have engaged in "assaults on children," the question was raised whether the men had advanced "from pedophilia to gerontophilia." Yet it was not reported how the researchers defined, or whether they even ascertained, either of these conditions. Specifically, what moved the (largely French) researchers to label elderly sexual interest in the elderly responsive to female initiative, according to the men as "gerontophilia" (cf. Kennelly, O'Neill, & O'Brien, 2011, p. 1076)?

Usage of the term *gerontophilia*, in fact, more often than not invites questions of medicalization. Authors of one study, for instance, consider "sex with elderly" to inform what they call "paraphilia-associated sexual arousal patterns" (frequency figures were not specified, alas; Ahlers et al., 2011, pp. 1366-7). Authors of another study into the prevalence of search terms for "paraphilic" ("problematic or deviant") online pornography (Hammond et al., 2009) categorize $124/79427 = 0.15\%$ of these terms as "gerontophilic". Neither of these studies, however, defined or even discussed how gerontophilia would relate to paraphilia.

To address these problems more systematically, below I discuss (1) coinage of the term and early history of the notion of gerontophilia; (2) its consecutive conceptual frameworks; finally, (3) implications for contemporary, wider discussions animating the forensics of paraphilia and sex crime. This overview is offered specifically to ask whether it might speak to long-standing and

ongoing debates about the epistemological underpinnings of the notion of paraphilia (e.g., Potter, 2013), controversy over "erotic age preference" paraphilias more specifically (e.g., Good & Burstein, 2012; cf. Green as well as Langfeldt in issue 5.1, 2010, issue of this journal), and the status of mental disorders more generally (e.g., Greenberg, 2013).

Coinage and Early History

The early medical history of "gerontophilia" has not been discussed in the English literature. The OED lists gerontophilia as a derivative of adjective gerontophil (added 1972) meaning "loving or favouring old people, esp. old men; desiring sexual relations with old people." Often attributed to Magnus Hirschfeld, the term Gerontophilie was coined by Richard von Krafft-Ebing in 1901 (p. 136), a year before his death and two years before the word paraphilia was coined (Janssen, 2014). Hirschfeld adopted the term without attribution five years later, and wavered subsequently in having the term denote an outlying age preference (as its pendant pedophilia, he estimated prevalence at 5%) and a morbid corollary of early fixation (vide infra). Albert Moll later estimated the portion of "gerontophiles" among 500 homosexuals at 2-3% (Moll, 1921, pp. 23-24). Beyond "alten Männern" (old men) and "Greisen" (elderly) Moll does not define the term.

A few alternative terms were coined around that time in German literature, none of which is widely known. Most were occasioned by attempts to sub-categorize "sexual inversion." Among the first to allude to gerontophilia was Tarnowsky, who writes the following paragraph in 1886 (quote taken from the 1898 English translation):

On proceeding one step further in psychical degeneracy, we come to subjects who have an exclusive taste for old men [ausschliessliche Neigung zu alten Männern]. Many born pederasts feel attracted only by men with gray beards. For them neither youth, nor elegance of bodily form, nor beauty, whether in woman or in man, is of any importance; their sexual instinct can only be excited by the aspect of a gray beard, sometimes indeed by the ugliest face, rendered repulsive by deformity. (1886, p. 20/1898, p. 24)

Moll likewise dedicates a short paragraph to "Neigung zu alten Männern" ("passion pour les vieillards à barbe blanche", in a French translation) among men and considers it a "sexual perversion complicating sexual inversion" (Moll, 1891; 1893, p. 197). He mentions a case but does not discuss it. In 1900, Jäger (1900, pp. 110-111; the article is purportedly from an unpublished, 1879 manuscript) used the term Senilophilie in discussing two male same-sex cases with whom he was corresponding, both in their early 20s. Omitting reference to Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis used the term *presbyophilia* ("love of the aged") in 1905 (p. 753) and 1906 (p. 11; unchanged in Ellis, 1933, p. 129), as Krafft-Ebing without case to report and seemingly for purely taxonomical purposes. A case study of a gerontophile by Charles Féré, in 1905, was possibly the first to appear in French, indeed the first in medical history. The term seemingly entered the English language in 1906 abstracts of that French article (*Journal of Nervous and Mental Health*, 1906, p. 290; *The British Journal of Children's Diseases*, 3, 1906, p. 554). A German and likely first forensic case report in 1907, by future Nobel Prize winner Julius Wagner-Jauregg, applied the term *Alt-Weiberliebe*, a quaint vernacular term seemingly never used before in this context. Finally, Bembo (c1912, pp. 41-42, 68) offered an off-hand typology of same-sex age preferences, with the Spanish word *senectas* indicating those erotically interested in those above age 50.

Only the 12th, posthumous edition of Von Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1903), the last to

have been completed by the author himself, discusses a case that could warrant the designation *gerontophilia* (p. 263). That term, however, does not occur until the posthumous, 13th and 14th German editions by Alfred Fuchs (1907, pp. 204-209; 1912, pp. 209-214) and subsequent editions by Albert Moll, which offer little beyond an integral recounting of Wagner-Jauregg's report. The term occurs just once in Krafft-Ebing's oeuvre and remains theoretical beside his claim that he found cases only among "sexual inverts." In the 1901 passage, he arranged gerontophilia with *pedophilia erotica* (a term he coined in an 1896 forensic article) under the unelaborated conceptual header of "age fetishism". The 1901 coinage was reviewed in well-read publications, including the 1902, 4th, volume of Hirschfeld's *Jahrbuch für Sexuelle Zwischenstufen* (p. 827), and in the second, 1903, volume of Iwan Bloch's *Beiträge zur Aetiologie der Psychopathia Sexualis* (1903, II, pp. 259-260).

Hirschfeld later (1906, p. 198) listed *Gerontophilie* in a triadic schema of same-sex age preferences, complementing *Ephebophilie* (youth) and *Androphilie* (men). Hirschfeld (1914, pp. 280-281) went on to label the latter two as "main groups" and pedophilia and gerontophilia as outlying "subgroups" of same-sex erotic attraction. Here he also coined corresponding female terms, with *Graophilie* denoting women's same-sex attraction to elderly women. These classifications were reviewed and entered American medical literature later that year, in Clark (1914, p. 352; a typo seemingly occurred in Clark's "grasphilia"). Ellis rather put *presbyophilia* in between *paidophilia* and *necrophilia*, but this tentative line-up enjoyed little if any academic following. Freud never used the word in print. English sources typically adopted the term *gerontophilia*; Clifford Allen (1961, p. 810; 1962, p. 220), however, defined his term *gerontosexuality* as "the use of an elderly person as a sexual object," opining that "when a young person *prefers* an elderly mate it is probably a perversion."

Conceptual Frameworks

A meagre total of half a dozen or so *forensic* case studies were encountered in the literature since 1900. Theoretical gestures are sparse, none of the earliest of which enjoys medical currency today, and none of which was informed by more than a few cases.

Surprisingly little sexological attention has been given to normative age preference at all, let alone the senior (beyond "teleiophilic") years. Definitions of "older adulthood" in the context of sexuality research vary, and need not rely on age (Hillman, 2012). Research into normative partner-age preference typically stops short of being informative for age brackets beyond 60 years, or may lump all preference beyond 40 years. Researchers report that their "phallometric apparatus does not include stimuli to test for the presence of gerontophilia" (Kolla et al., 2010, p. 504) and so neither normative nor forensic biometric data exist. Discussion of a "gerontophilic" sadist (prosecuted for "attempts to violate 80-, 82-, 71- and 50-yr-old women", but also for forcing two boys aged 10-12 year to masturbate him, as well as generally sadistic tendencies) subjected to penile volumetrics reported by Freund (1967, p. 227) illustrates this: the reader learns little more than that he had "an erotic preference for adult women."

Unlike Wagner-Jauregg's case, which dealt with sadistic murder, Féré's and virtually all other early discussions were not occasioned by forensic circumstance. Féré's was occasioned by pending imposition of marriage by his parents on a 27-year-old male client who preferred a 62-year-old lady to a 20-year-old maiden beauty. Féré's concerns were with marriage prospects, counseling of patient's parents, the historically new question of the pervert in society, and with fecundity: with the satisfaction of the reproductive instinct. Although anamnesis involved intergenerational seduction at age 17, he offered the speculation that gerontophilia was a "congenital anomaly," a sign of degenerative constitution even, as in this case, if other symptoms were absent.

Krafft-Ebing, Ellis and early case reporters, including Wagner-Jauregg, stressed the fetishistic nature of gerontophilic desire, and considered early imprinting though seduction the etiological crux (Alfred Binet's theorem). Supporting data were entirely anecdotal, however. Early psychoanalysts' references to gerontophilia attempted to decipher and explain the symbolic content of the "senex" theme and tended to see it less as a sexual perversion than as entailing a spectrum of "strong affections". Many authoritative elaborations of the term, including Bloch's, Wilhelm Stekel's, Albert Moll's, and Ernest Jones's, extended to discussions about the normalcy of markedly age-disparate "love affairs" and marriages. In a 1913 article Jones offers no cases but briefly mentions one man who "fell in love with every spinster over forty he came across" (1913, p. 657). He goes on to speculate that gerontophilia, a "special fondness for old people" (p. 221), was a key feature of what he called the "grandfather-complex" in which the grandparent is substituted for the Oedipal parent. (A 1918 translation of this article is tipped by the OED as holding the word's first attestation in English.)

Stekel later discussed three new cases (1922, pp. 337-341), again none of which forensic, subsuming gerontophilia with pedophilia under his inclusive analytic moniker of "psychosexual infantilism." In this he followed contemporary, essentially speculative, gestures by other first-hour students of psychoanalytic theory Otto Juliusburger (1914, p. 201), Hirschfeld (1921, p. 48), and Arthur Kronfeld (1926). Accordingly, the figure of the elderly partner is less the associative effect of an early seduction than a symbolic transposition, retention, and in part eroticization in later life of the constellation of parental, and in cases grandparental, care experienced in infancy and childhood. The "Schwarmerei" for elderly or at least older people would entail an underlying "fixation of the father or mother imago". Stekel sees in gerontophilic infatuation a discrete symptom of a continuous and generalized culture of familial sentiments, rendering precise explanations in specific cases difficult.

Subsequent German-language case discussions such as by Gilula (1925), Bien (1928) and Kutzinski (1930) mostly revolved around single cases which lead the authors to speculate about the relative import of early exposure on the one hand and "degenerative" or hereditary predisposition on the other. Theory formation thus remains largely stalled until after the 1980 DSM-III. John Money defined gerontophilia as "the condition in which a young adult is dependent on the actuality or fantasy of erotosexual activity with a much older partner in order to initiate and maintain erotosexual arousal and facilitate or achieve orgasm" (Money 1981, p. 107). A later definition reads: "a paraphilia of the eligibilic/stigmatic type in which the partner must be parental or grandparental in age," which has gerontophilia belong to the "chronophilias" where "the paraphile's sexueroetic age is discordant with his/her actual chronological age and is concordant with the age of the partner" (Money, 1986, pp. 260, 262). Reminiscent of early 20th century theorists, however, Money's typology and definition remained theoretical (in his 50-odd year publishing career in sexology he never seemed to have commented on a single case) and his broader typological approach to the paraphilias achieved negligible following. Moreover, Money offers no rationale for construing gerontophilia as necessarily involving age difference, and no evidence for the existence of a "chronophilic" subclass of paraphilias. A word for preferred seniority of partners had been offered early on (*presbyterophilia*, by Von Römer, 1904, p. 349), again in the early context of typologizing "sexual inversion"; but how such a notion would have to figure in relation to sexual psychopathology remains unprobed. An evolutionary framework that centralizes reproductive outcome could be made to inform gerontophilia's nosological status (Seto, 2004, p. 323n2). But such a framework seems hardly applicable hardly sensible at least to 21st century "sexualities."

Discussion

Since *gerontophilia*'s half dozen coinages in the 1900-1912 period, incidence, origins, and forensic pertinence of the supposed condition remain speculative. Definitions as well as nosological, etiological and typological gestures vary accordingly. The psychiatric salience of either inclusive or exclusive erotic interest in "elderly" persons is doubtful on several levels. First, unlike pedophilia, expression of it does not necessarily warrant a forensic or legal circumscription. Most of gerontophilia's eclectic behavioral spectrum might well fall securely within the legally recognized sphere of "consenting adults in private." As was generally understood in pre-war commentaries, "bonding", a pattern of "affairs," and "sexual preference" do not necessarily imply the other.

As with pedophilia or any sexual liaison, furthermore, one cannot *as a rule* presume that where sex is pursued, lust is only ever "rationalized" by love rhetoric, nor that it entails the "sexualization" of a rather more multi-stranded and otherwise wholesome "philia". How *philia* and *sex* relate has been resolved historically in the brutish definition of the *philias* as "sexual perversions." Quite generally: one may be looking more at moral rubrics than at psychological entities. The post-1980s turn away from psychoanalysis and coeval definitions of paraphilia in exclusive terms of "sexual arousal and gratification" seems to reflect legal and moral conventions more than they do evidence-based medicine. Yet, "there has been no empirical study to support the view that most or even a significant number of [sex] offenders [against the elderly] have a sexual preference for elders" (Burgess et al., 2007, p. 584; cf. Ball, 2005, p. 137). Of six cases of sexual abuse against elderly studied by Ball and colleagues in the early 1990s, for only two there was "evidence of a previous history of a sexual predilection for older partners" (Ball, 2005, p. 134).

Second, DSM-5 stipulates for the first time in DSM's publication history that *paraphilias* are not *ipso facto* *mental disorders*. Without substantive evidence for its etiological role in sex offences, the salience of speaking of a "paraphilia" in the context of elderly as an age stratum defies contemporary definitions of paraphilia (Hinderliter, 2010, p. 19) and would perhaps strictly serve to grease contemporary U.S. legal machineries such as that of civil commitment (Testa & West, 2010). Concomitant risk for forensic hijacking of psychiatric labels has been pointed out in the context of another arguable "chronophilia," in casu "hebephilia" (Frances & First, 2011). The APA (2013, p. 685) specifically includes elderly *per se* in the "normophilic" range of "phenotypically normal, physically mature, consenting human partners" and thus denies any such condition as "gerontophilia" *per se* the status of "anomalous target preference." In cases of sadism or lust murder, the legal and psychiatric professional may be more readily concerned with sadism and/or murder than the offender's "erotic age orientation". Victim age may have immediate legal implications, to be sure. The Texas Penal Code §22.021, for instance, considers sexual assault "aggravated" when the victim is under 14 or "an elderly individual" meaning a person 65 years of age or older. But if a DSM-5 Sexual Sadism Disorder is being diagnosed, it should do little to the defendant's immediate predicament to stipulate a "co-morbidity" with "Gerontophilic Disorder."

Conclusion

Substantive arguments have been advanced to dismiss the paraphilias, and erotic age preference paraphilias in particular, from the DSM/ICD indices altogether (Moser & Kleinplatz, 2006). On a more fundamental level, contemporary categorical (as opposed to currently tipped *dimensional*) approaches to psychiatry have received considerable opposition in the run-up to DSM-5, as psychiatric categories mostly lack biomarkers (as is the case for all "paraphilias") and often seem to animate legal and social, not so much intrapsychic, conflicts (Greenberg, 2013). The historical case of "gerontophilia" adds to these multi-level discussions. With increasing attention to elderly sexual

agency and wellness, and with extremely fragmentary forensic evidence even after a century of sexological attention, the notion of "gerontophilia" seems little more than a nosological fossil.

Its history neatly illustrates, however, the epochal move from an etiology-centered, psychodynamic, and symbolic approach of the *vita sexualis*, to a forensic, biomedical, and narrowly sexual conception of the paraphilias and of chronophilias more specifically. Concomitant expansions and contractions of analytic scope reflect shifting consensus on what should intrigue the professional. Equally, they appear accompaniments of broad and global cultural shifts in the discursive burdening of intimacy, from the late 19th century onward, with terms such as "sexuality," "psychology," "development," and "mental disorder". For now, the term might stand in the way of appreciating a potentially intricate diversion from the reproductive and evolutionarily expected norm. Intriguingly, however, many languages fail to provide "a snappy, funny, non-judgmental, charming word for people (male, female, heterosexual, homosexual, old, young) who are sexually attracted to older people" (O'Connor, 2007, p. 29). This may have more to do with archaic (in fact *medieval*: Covey, 1989), negative attitudes toward sex among elderly, than with sexual psychopathy.

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