
REFLECTIONS ON THE DEVELOPMENT
OF THE
PHALLOMETRIC METHOD
OF ASSESSING EROTIC PREFERENCES

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The First Sources of Clients

In the early fifties homosexual interaction was still an indictable offense in Czechoslovakia. I was of course opposed to this measure, but I still thought, as did my colleagues at the psychiatric university hospital in Prague where I was working, that homosexuality was an experientially acquired neurosis. At that time a relatively large number of homosexual (androphilic) clients came to our hospital. Most of them requested to be made heterosexual (gynephilic), or at least more bisexual, because they wished to start a family, or because, in their religion, homosexual interaction was a sin.

A second source of androphilic clients were those who were able to avoid charges by promising to undergo psychiatric treatment. A third source were military conscripts. At that time there was a 2 year compulsory military service in Czechoslovakia. Men who indicated that they were androphilic to the physician who was assessing their fitness were exempt from military service. Some androphiles did so, and naturally so did some gynephiles. The assessing military physicians referred a number of these men to our hospital for differential diagnosis. However, under these circumstances, it was often impossible to infer from a client's self-report whether he was really androphilic.

The Search for a Method of Objective Assessment and Measurement

I had already been trying for several years to find objective psychological diagnostic methods for various "neuroses", but had little success. The reason for this search was that I had realized the observational method used in psychoanalysis had turned out to be a failure, virtually unusable as an instrument for individual diagnosis or research. Because androphiles seemed to constitute a fairly homogeneous group of patients with a neurosis, I subsequently focused my search for objective diagnostic methods on the differentiation between gynephiles and androphiles. After having failed using the major "projective" and personality tests, and after a few primitive and equally unsuccessful attempts to devise similar procedures better suited for my purpose, I turned to having males view slides of nude females and males and I tried recording their breathing, heart rate, and finger plethysmography, while viewing these pictures. This too was unsuccessful, and led to the basic idea of penile plethysmography.

The existing mechanical plethysmographs used in Wundtian type psychophysiological labs for assessing volume-changes in the limbs measured only relatively small changes. However, a physiologist colleague had recently published a similar device, for finger plethysmography that incidentally was also capable of measuring a much larger range of volume changes. This became our

first phallometric device. A further seemingly insurmountable problem was getting the sensor air-tight. A preliminary publication of the method appears in the Czech psychiatric journal (Freund, 1957). The first English publication was in Review of Czechoslovak Medicine (Freund, Diamant, & Pinkava, 1958).

The Phallometric Test of Pedophilia and the Faking of Phallometric Results

When phallometry began to look promising as a test of erotic sex and age preferences, we started using it mainly as a test of pedophilia, that is, determining who has an erotic preference for children over adults. Later, this became, virtually, our sole diagnostic use of phallometry. However, it was there that we encountered the first major, and not solely technical, stumbling block. From the time of the introduction of the method, it was clear that a notable proportion of examinees was able to suppress their natural responses or fake spurious responses to varying degrees. However, for most examinees their ability to fake was quite limited, as far as the differentiation between gynephilia and androphilia was concerned. As was to be expected, it was much easier for an examinee to fake in regard to the erotically preferred age bracket than to the erotically preferred sex of partner (Freund, Watson, & Rienzo, 1988). This made diagnosing pedophilia much more difficult than the differentiation between gynephilia and androphilia.

Over the years a system of evaluation of the examinees' responses for the individual diagnosis of pedophilia was developed, which takes into account these intentional distortions. A few years ago Ray Blanchard and Cathy Spegg converted this diagnostic system into a program, which makes possible computer diagnosis (see Freund & Blanchard, 1989). The phallometric diagnosis should, however, constitute only one among several relevant aspects of the assessment.

The Demand Situation

A further stumbling block in the development of the phallometric test of pedophilia was the choice of non-pedophilic control examinees. In Czechoslovakia, our controls were paid volunteers recruited among men in compulsory military service. Here in Canada, we worked first with paid new immigrants (coming mainly from Italy). When we switched to paid volunteers from governmental unemployment offices, the phallometric test of pedophilia broke down. The differentiation between sex offenders against children and controls was very much weaker than before. We then used sex offenders against adult females as our gynephilic controls, because at that time it had become difficult to recruit suitable volunteers from the governmental offices for the unemployed. Once again, phallometry began differentiating as well as before.

The inconsistency in the efficiency of the phallometric test of pedophilia was most likely due to differences between the groups in regard to the demand situation (cf. Orne, 1962). The volunteers from the unemployment offices were obviously totally uninterested in the outcome of their test. They often had to be admonished not to look away from the screen or had to be kept from falling asleep. In contrast, the soldiers in Czechoslovakia paid close attention to the stimuli. They might not have trusted the confidentiality of the situation or they may have been interested in their test results; indeed they usually asked about their results. The new immigrants to Canada may also have not fully trusted our promise of confidentiality.

Among control groups, the strongest motivation not to appear pedophilic has understandably been found in the sex offenders against physically mature females. These men were being seen by psychiatrists for an assessment, as requested by lawyers or the courts. Only for these men did the demand situation created by testing approach that of the sex offenders against children. However, there actually does not exist any group for which this demand situation would equal that of non-admitting pedophiles who are acutely aware they might be found-out from their responses. Only a small proportion of pedophiles admit to having the paraphilia.

Estimating the Number of Pedophiles Among Different Groups of Sex Offenders Against Children

It has never been expected that all sex offenders against children would be pedophiles. Therefore, when developing the phallometric test of pedophilia, we selected only extra-familial (non-incest) offenders against two or more children as index cases, under the supposition that such offenders are most likely almost all pedophiles. Quinsey, Chaplin, and Carrigan (1979), in a phallometric experiment, provided support for our clinical supposition that men in the father role who sexually abused their daughters are less often pedophilic than are sex offenders against unrelated female children. During the past few years, the number of cases in our data-bank has become large enough to allow empirical validation that different proportions of pedophiles can be expected in various groups of sex offenders against children. This was the topic of our most recent investigation of the diagnostic power of the phallometric test of pedophilia (Freund & Watson, 1991), in which pedophilia was diagnosed in about three-quarters of offenders with two or more unrelated female child victims, and in over 85% of offenders with two or more male minors as victims.

Under the supposition that the phallometric method diagnoses pedophilia (or hebephilia) equally well over all offenders, we calculated proportions of pedophiles among offenders with only one known victim. This assessment allowed

us to conclude, that only about one-quarter of all heterosexual incestuous offenders (see Freund, Watson, & Dickey, 1991) one-half of the non-incestuous offenders against only one female child, and about three-quarters of the offenders against one male child or pubescent were pedophiles (or homosexual hebephiles).

The test is an appropriate means for discriminating sex offenders against children for different types of therapy and related management, or for selecting pedophiles for research projects. The test results should, however, never be used in a court of law without being evaluated by a professional sexologist. The usefulness of the phallometric test of pedophilia could be substantially increased if each laboratory would endeavor to assess the sensitivity, specificity, and reliability of its individual procedures.

A Phallometric Test of an Inclination Towards Sexual Violence

In the future, the phallometric method may also become useful in diagnosing paraphilias other than pedophilia. Abel, Blanchard, Becker, & Djenderedjian (1978) have developed a technique for the detection of an inclination toward sexual violence, using spoken narratives as stimuli. They, as well as Barbaree, Marshall, and Lanthier (1979), Quinsey and Chaplin (1982), and other authors have demonstrated that the method is, in principle, capable of diagnosing such inclinations. However, this assessment poses new problems that will have to be mastered before a reasonably valid test for the diagnosis of an inclination toward sexual violence may become available.

The Use of the Phallometric Method as an Instrument in Theoretical Research

There appear to be good reasons for being optimistic about the further development of the phallometric method as a diagnostic instrument. However, the question still remains open as to what to expect from the method as an instrument of theoretical research in the area of erotic preferences. Each new technique or systematic observation which deviates substantially from earlier observational methods may be expected not only to render a more precise picture of the object of observation, but also to lead to new general knowledge. However, is the phallometric method sufficiently different from what a man can subjectively experience and communicate? In other words: Does the phallometric test of erotic preferences only demonstrate what the examinee knows anyway, but does not want to tell, as is mostly the case in pedophilic sex offenders?

Even if this were so, the method's diagnostic potential alone may be used to gain knowledge more general than individual diagnosis. The study of bisexuality is a case in point. Freund, Heasman, Racansky & Glancy (1984) examined the phallometric profile of bisexual men who claim to act out and to be attracted to

both men and women. They compared 3 groups of men: self-professed paid gynephilic and androphilic volunteers, and clients who labelled themselves as bisexuals and who requested to be made gynephilic or at least more bisexual. A self-report scale of degree of erotic attraction to women and phallometric responses to pictures of nude women and men were compared. The scale score of the self-professed bisexuals was significantly different from that of the androphilic controls and much more similar to that of the gynephilic controls. In contrast, the phallometric responses of the self-professed bisexuals to pictures of nude men and women did not differ from those of the androphilic controls.

The credibility of the phallometric results appears to depend on the examinees' demand situation. In the studies I have mentioned, the examinees were responding in contradiction to their demand situation, and this lends substantial credibility to the results. When used in conjunction with an assessment of the demand situation by means of the examinees' self-reports, phallometry may be capable of providing more general information.

In my opinion, the area where the phallometric method may most likely be useful in theoretically oriented research is the systematic analysis of the erotic impact of behavior patterns (and their sequencing) in non-paraphilic and paraphilic males. This direction has been introduced by Jarka Madlafousek in collaboration with Alex Kolarsky (Kolarsky & Madlafousek, 1972, 1977, 1983), but neither these two authors nor anybody else has continued along this line of research.

Phallometry has basically proven to be a satisfactory instrument for the diagnosis of pedophilia, but there are many other practical and theoretical potentialities. The method still has to be explored. This however, has always met with difficulties. At present we are trying to develop a phallometric test for sadism in rapists and, if possible, also of a chronic inclination to rape.

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