

Addiction and the Humanities, Vol. 8(2): Shameful addiction? A look at media portrayals of sex addiction.

February 24, 2012

Like gambling and shopping, some people engage in excessive sexual behavior to the extent that it disrupts their private, public, and professional lives. Although excessive sexual behavior has received less scientific attention than other behaviors, self-proclaimed sexual addiction by high-profile celebrities such as Michael Douglas, David Duchovny, and Tiger Woods (Serjeant, 2008; Klein, 2010), increases the general public's awareness of this problem. Today, reality shows and movies grapple with excessive sexual behavior - but it is unclear whether these shows present a realistic depiction of its consequences. Today's BASIS explores recent media portrayals of sex addiction through two case studies: Sex Rehab with Dr. Drew, and the movie, Shame.

The science behind sex addiction

Researchers disagree about whether excessive sexual behavior constitutes an addiction. There are two primary explanations for excessive sexual behavior in the field today: sexual addiction and sexual compulsivity (Bancroft & Vukadinovic, 2004). Sex addiction posits that excessive sex is an addiction, much like substance or gambling addiction. Some people have risk factors that predispose them to addiction; addiction might occur when people with risk factors experience sex as a pleasurable activity (Bancroft & Vukadinovic, 2004). In contrast, sexual compulsivity suggests that the disorder is more similar to obsessive-compulsive disorder. Compulsivity refers to the loss of ability to freely control the performance of a particular behavior. In the case of sexual compulsivity, patients use sex, masturbation, or other sexual behaviors as a compulsive ritual (Bancroft & Vukadinovic, 2004).

There is currently no entry for sex addiction in the DSM-IV-R (APA, 2000). APA work groups have suggested including sex addiction as an addition to the DSM-V, but it will not be included. Instead, the DSM-V will include hypersexual disorder,

which addresses similar symptoms (APA, 2012). More research is needed to fully parse out the etiology of sex addiction.

Sex Rehab with Dr. Drew

Sex Rehab with Dr. Drew tracks eight celebrities who are self-professed sex addicts. The celebrities live in a house and seek treatment together - all of which is captured by cameras for public showing. These celebrities sign a 'celibacy pact' upon entry and attend regular one-on-one and group therapy sessions. Dr. Drew Pinsky is a board-certified Internal Medicine and Addiction Medicine medical doctor. He serves as host and guides treatment throughout the show (vh1.com).

Throughout its eight episodes, the show makes great effort to liken sex addiction to other, 'classic' portrayals of addiction. During the first episode, each celebrity is introduced, and speaks briefly about their experience with sex addiction. Each celebrity invariably describes his or her experience in terms of other addictions. For example, musician Phil Varone likens his addiction to walking into a room of cocaine every day.

Implicit in Sex Rehab's model is that the celebrities are patients in need of a 'cure'. Dr. Drew wears a stethoscope and acts as if addiction is a disease to cure. Dr. Drew approaches the treatment as if a childhood trauma is the cause of all addictions. Because producers select the participants on the show Sex Rehab easily creates the illusion that this is necessarily so. Viewer are led to assume that the experiences of the celebrities is representative of people who engage in excessive sexual behavior, more generally.

At the end of the day, Sex Rehab is a reality TV show. The producers' primary goals are to create a successful reality TV show, not to provide an accurate depiction of addiction or rehab. In an article, show alumnus Duncan Roy reveals that the show's producers were "hellbent on drama and titillation" (Roy, 2009, p. 1). Furthermore, the actual rehab process spans 21 days (vh1.com), while the show is only eight one-hour episodes. This has two important effects. Firstly, viewers might have a distorted sense of the duration of rehab. Secondly, the depicted scenes would be the most 'screenworthy,' shielding less interesting moments of the rehab process from public view. This might bias viewers' impressions of the rehab process.

Shame

Shame (McQueen, 2011) is a movie directed by Steve McQueen and starring Michael Fassbender and Carey Mulligan (imdb.com). The movie follows Brandon, a high-functioning executive who engages excessively in sex and pornography. Central to the movie is Brandon's search for sex and the toll that it takes on his life. He has trouble building intimate relationships and ignores his sister's numerous pleas for help, with nearly disastrous consequences.

The movie carefully picks apart Brandon's life. It begins with the image of handsome, successful, and charming man. This image quickly degenerates into someone who is deeply self-destructive. As the movie continues, many scenes begin to parallel 'stereotypical' scenes common in addiction movies. Brandon has sex with one woman in an alleyway; it is not hard to picture a drug deal, or drug use in the exact same setting. Brandon's 'fall from grace' occurs in a gay nightclub. The club is a red-lit den of debauchery. The image is strikingly similar to a movie portrayal of a crack den or opium lair. We begin to feel sorry for Brandon, as we realize how damaged he is beneath the surface. At the end of the movie, we see Brandon's cycle continue, despite the fact his addiction led him to ignore his sister's pleas for help, eventually leading to her nearly-successful suicide.

It is clear that Brandon has a sex problem, but is this character an accurate representation of the experiences of people who engage in excessive sexual behavior? Brandon's problems are clearly very advanced; this might mean many viewers have trouble relating to the character. Perhaps a character with a less severe problem might have a greater impact on the public than Brandon. Furthermore, while the film is intentionally vague about his background, it is clear that Brandon experienced some form of childhood trauma. Like the celebrities in Sex Rehab, the film suggests the trauma eventually causes his sex addiction. Viewers must be careful not to assume that childhood trauma is the only cause of sex addiction.

Conclusion

Both Sex Rehab and Shame depict sex addiction similarly to drug- and alcohol-related expressions of addiction. Both play into the stereotype victimization and hopeless cycles of self-destruction. Although both might contain elements of truth, neither really further the public's understanding of addiction. Understandably, a person with moderate addiction symptoms might not be the

most interesting character on a show, but it is still important for the public to understand that addiction takes many forms, not just the extreme cases presented by Sex Rehab and Shame. Whereas it is good that shows such as these bring a non-traditional addiction into the public consciousness, more effort could be put into making a more human depiction of the problem.

- Daniel Tao

What do you think? Please use the comment link below to provide feedback.

References

American Psychiatric Association. (2000). *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed., text rev).

American Psychiatric Association (2012). Hypersexual Disorder. Retrieved on Feb. 22, 2012, from: <http://www.dsm5.org/ProposedRevisions/Pages/proposedrevision.aspx?rid=415>.

Bancroft, J., & Vukadinovic, Z. (2004). Sexual addiction, sexual compulsivity, sexual impulsivity or what? Toward a theoretical model. *Journal of Sex Research*, 41, 225-234.

Klein, M. (2010). Our addiction to Tiger Woods' "Sex Addiction". Retrieved on Feb. 22, 2012, from <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/sexual-intelligence/201002/our-addiction-tiger-woods-sex-addiction>.

imdb.com. (2012). Shame (2011). Retrieved on Feb. 22, 2012, from: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1723811/>

McQueen, S. (2011). *Shame* [Motion Picture]. UK: Film4.

Roy, D. (2008). Is Dr. Drew a Phony? Retrieved on Feb. 22, 2012, from <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2009/12/17/i-am-a-sex-addict-and-i-play-one-on-tv.html?cid=bsa:topnav:sxyb>.

vh1.com. (2008). Sex Rehab with Dr. Drew. Retrieved on Feb. 22, 2012, from http://www.vh1.com/shows/sex_rehab_with_dr_drew/cast.jhtml.

Serjeant, J. (2008). David Duchovny's sex disorder likened to alcoholism. Retrieved on Feb. 22, 2012, from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2008/08/29/us-duchovny-idUSN2835847820080829>.