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Frotteurism and Gender

Contributors: Jeffrey T. Guterman

Edited by: Kevin L. Nadal

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Frotteurism is a disorder characterized by fantasies, sexual behaviors, or urges involving rubbing or touching, especially the genitals, against the body or clothing of a nonconsenting person, usually in crowded public places. The term *frotteurism* is derived from the word *frotteur*, which comes from the French verb *frotter*, meaning “to rub.” Frotteurism is relevant to gender issues for various reasons, including the finding that most of the perpetrators are male and most of the victims are female. In this entry, the diagnosis, demographics, and prevalence of frotteurism are described, and legal and cultural issues related to this condition are identified. The entry concludes with a discussion of theories and treatments related to frotteurism.

Diagnosis, Demographics, and Prevalence

Frotteurism is classified in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* as a paraphilia, a disorder characterized by recurrent sexual fantasies and urges involving objects, the suffering or humiliation of oneself or one’s partner, or children or other nonconsenting persons. Frotteurism was renamed frotteuristic disorder in the fifth edition of the *DSM (DSM-5)*, which was published in 2013. According to the *DSM-5*, the criteria for frotteuristic disorder are met if for a 6-month period an individual has experienced recurrent and intense sexually arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors involving touching and rubbing against a nonconsenting person; they have acted on these sexual urges; or the sexual urges or fantasies have caused them marked distress or interpersonal difficulty. In some cases, people with frotteuristic disorder achieve orgasm during the act. Frotteuristic disorder sometimes co-occurs with other mental health disorders and clinical problems, especially other paraphilic disorders such as exhibitionism and combinations of paraphilic disorders. Individuals with frotteuristic disorder may also experience anxiety, shame, self-image, and other emotional problems that relate to and exacerbate their conditions and complicate treatment.

The prevalence rate of frotteurism has not been firmly established because it is presumed that most people with this condition do not voluntarily seek professional help. It is difficult to assess the prevalence of frotteurism because studies often lack methodological quality, include small sample sizes, use local rather than national or international samples, and do not consistently apply the *DSM* criteria. The prevalence rate of frotteurism may also be unreliable because victims are frequently unaware that they have been touched or rarely report incidents to the authorities. Frotteurism is a predominantly male disorder and usually first appears during late adolescence and declines by age 25 years. It has been estimated that 30% of adult males have engaged in frotteuristic acts, and 10% to 14% of males diagnosed with paraphilic disorders also meet the diagnostic criteria for frotteuristic disorder. Data regarding the prevalence of female diagnoses of frotteuristic disorder are unavailable.

Legal and Cultural Issues

In most countries, unwelcome touching of another person’s body is illegal. In many jurisdictions, frotteurism is considered a sexual assault and constitutes a misdemeanor or a felony criminal offense. Conviction may result in prison, mandatory mental health treatment, and registration as a sexual offender. Victims may file private civil lawsuits to seek monetary damages from the perpetrator. It is difficult to prosecute perpetrators as intent to touch is difficult to prove. If an alleged victim accuses an individual, the alleged perpetrator often denies the act. As a result, perpetrators are rarely prosecuted.

In some cultures, it is common for a woman's buttocks to be pinched or slapped in crowded areas. In Japan, the perpetrator of an act of frotteurism is often referred to as a *chikan*, or "groper." In India, frotteurism is referred to as "Eve teasing" and is also considered "a little rape." Frotteurism is widespread on public transportation in large cities. It has been estimated that 66% of female passengers in their 20s and 30s reported that they had been groped on trains in Tokyo. Due to widespread frotteurism in Tokyo, Mexico City, and Rio de Janeiro, women-only buses and trains have been introduced.

Theory and Treatment

Frotteurism is not well understood because few people with the condition present in clinical settings. Frotteurism has been conceptualized as ineffectual sexual assault and the perpetrators as less aggressive or timid rapists. A theory of courtship disorder views frotteurism as a deviation of the normal phase of tactile interaction that occurs during human sexual interaction. Cognitive behavioral theory presumes that thoughts play a mediating role in the development of frotteuristic behavior and associated feelings. Psychoanalytic theory holds that frotteurism is the result of repressed traumas and unconscious conflicts.

Treatment approaches for frotteurism include cognitive behavioral therapy, psychodynamic therapy, twelve-step programs, and medication. Cognitive behavioral therapy focuses on identifying and replacing the thoughts presumed to maintain frotteurism. Psychodynamic approaches aim to help people recall how their early-childhood experiences and past traumas unconsciously affect their adult sexual behaviors. Some individuals with frotteurism have experienced effective treatment outcomes in response to psychopharmacology, especially when used in combination with therapy. Research has found that it is critical for individuals to develop some degree of motivation to modify this behavioral pattern.

See also [Sexual Assault](#); [Sexual Disorders and Gender](#); [Sexual Offenders](#); [Sexuality and Adolescence](#)

- women
- sex work
- sex trafficking
- transsexualism
- sexism
- sexual harassment
- women against violence against women

Jeffrey T. Guterman

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Further Readings

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