

Devotees, Pretenders and Wannabes: Two Cases of Factitious Disability Disorder

Richard L. Bruno, Ph.D.^{1,2}

Despite having been described for more than a century, there is no understanding of the origin of the attractions, desires and behaviors of devotees, pretenders and wannabes (DPW's). Devotees are non-disabled people who are sexually attracted to people with disabilities, pretenders are non-disabled people who act as if they have a disability by using assistive devices and wannabes actually want to become disabled, sometimes going to extraordinary lengths to have a limb amputated. Two cases are presented in an effort to understand the psychology of DPW's and to suggest one psychologic concept—that of Factitious Disability Disorders—that may explain not only the obsession to be with disabled persons, but also the desire to pretend to be disabled and even the compulsion to become disabled. Also presented is a combined cognitive-behavioral approach to modify DPW's obsessions and compulsive, intrusive, illegal and sometimes self-injurious behaviors.

KEY WORDS: amputees; paraphilias; sexual deviations; factitious disorders; Munchausen's syndrome.

The advent of the Internet has brought to the attention of people with disabilities individuals who had heretofore largely remained hidden: Devotees, pretenders and wannabes (DPW's). *Devotees* are nondisabled people who are sexually attracted to people with disabilities, typically those with mobility impairments and especially amputees; *Pretenders* are non-disabled people who act as if they have a disability by using assistive devices [e.g., braces, crutches, and

¹Post-Polio Rehabilitation and Research Service, Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation, Saddle Brook, New Jersey; and Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, UMDNJ/New Jersey Medical School, Newark, New Jersey.

²Address correspondence to Dr. Richard L. Bruno, Director, Post-Polio Rehabilitation and Research Service, Kessler Institute for Rehabilitation, 300 Market Street, Saddle Brook, New Jersey 07662. E-Mail: PPSKIR@AOL.COM.

wheelchairs] in private and sometimes in public, so that they 'feel' disabled or are perceived by others as having a disability; *Wannabes* actually want to become disabled, sometimes going to extraordinary lengths to have a limb amputated. (1)

While the most common Internet bulletin boards, chat rooms and web sites are for male devotees of female amputees, others are for male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, plaster cast, crutch, leg, back and neck brace and even orthodonture DPW's. (1,2) An *America Online* bulletin board posting entitled "Bunion Love" requested "photos, videos, or correspondence dealing with gals [having] deformed/crippled feet, or toe/toes amputated . . . or who have severe bunions on their feet. The more severe, the better."

However, the Internet is by no means providing the first information on DPW's. Since the late 1800s the medical literature has described men and women who are sexually attracted to amputees, those who limp, or use crutches, braces and wheelchairs, as well as individuals who pretend to be or who actually want to become disabled (3-13).

DPW's interest in amputation has been the most frequently documented. Cases of men and women who are attracted to amputees, who themselves want to have amputations and who have successfully become amputees have been described since 1882. (3,10,11,14-17) Money (14), who has focused on the interest in amputation, coined the terms *apotemnophilia* (achieving sexual fulfillment by fantasizing about being an amputee) and *acrotomophilia* (requiring amputee partners, real or in fantasy, to achieve sexual satisfaction).

In 1983, Dixon (18) published results of the first survey of male acrotomophiles, individuals who were customers of AMPIX, a company providing stories about and pictures of amputees. The 195 acrotomophiles were college educated, professional, white males, 75% of whom had been aware of their interest in amputees by age 15. Although 55% of respondents had dated amputees and 40% had had sex with an amputee, only 5% had married an amputee. Fifty-three percent of the respondents had pretended to be an amputee (11% having done so publicly) and 71% had fantasized about being an amputee, indicating that the majority of devotees were also pretenders and wannabes.

Consistent with these data is a recent study of 50 acrotomophiles by Nattress. (3) Again, subjects were college educated, professional, white males, 96% of whom had been aware of their interest in amputees by their teens. In this sample, 41% had been married to or lived with an amputee, more than 43% had pretended to be amputees and 22% desired to become amputees.

On psychometric testing, the 50 acrotomophiles were found on average to have high scores on self-esteem and intuitive thinking, but low scores on social interest, emotional stability and personal relations. The low scores were referred to by Nattress as "problematic behavior tendencies." Such tendencies have become a concern of people with disabilities since devotees do demonstrate prob-