Dhat Syndrome: The Influence of Medicalization and Globalization on the Presentation and Treatment of Sexual Dysfunction in South Asian Men

Dhat syndrome, currently considered a “culture bound syndrome” in the DSM-IV, is a diagnostic label given to men of South Asian origin who report feelings of fatigue and other symptoms due to excessive semen loss. This is reported to occur either involuntarily by passage in urine or nocturnal emission, or voluntarily through excessive masturbation or premarital sex. Recent research has begun to imply that the dhat syndrome presentation may in fact be a culturally specific symptom of underlying depression, and thus several studies have concluded that it should thus be treated with antidepressant medication. This medical view of the phenomenon suggests that it is indicative of individual pathology, and ignores the social and cultural factors that may be contributing to the experience.

Researchers acknowledge that its appearance is linked to traditional Hindu and ayurvedic texts, which place great value upon semen and its retention, but their contextualization of the syndrome is limited. The current medical formulation does not consider the social changes occurring due to globalization, including the exportation of western sexual values that clash with more traditional South Asian perspectives, or the larger sociohistorical pattern of attempts to preserve male strength through strict semen management. Rather than medicalizing and pathologizing an individual’s experience, treatment providers should be mindful of that individual’s existence within a social system that includes interconnected ideas about sexuality and masculinity, which may lead to sexual distress related to semen loss. Likewise researchers should focus on producing culturally sensitive interventions that are congruent with the individual’s worldview.

Biography
Trevor Floyd, MA is studying clinical psychology in the Graduate Institute of Professional Psychology at the University of Hartford. He is currently completing his predoctoral internship at the Manhattan Psychiatric Center on Ward’s Island in New York. Trevor recently defended his dissertation Pornography and Modern Sexuality: The Nature and Impact of Representations of Sex, and previously served as a co-chair of the Connecticut Psychological Association’s task force on Sex and Gender Diversity. His research interests include all intersections of clinical matters and sexuality, particularly the relationship between the social construction of sex and the medical industry.