Sex differences in sexual fantasy patterns

GLENN D. WILSON and RUDIE J. LANG

Department of Psychology, Institute of Psychiatry, De Crespigny Park, Denmark Hill, London SE5 8AF, U.K.

Summary—A detailed sexual fantasy questionnaire was completed anonymously and returned by post by a sample of 90 Londoners stratified by sex and social class and representing a 30% return rate. Men and women were equally likely to accept and return the questionnaires. Information was also collected concerning sexual behaviour, libido and satisfaction. Factor analysis revealed four main types of fantasy: (1) Exploratory (e.g., group sex, promiscuity, homosexuality); (2) Intimate (e.g., kissing, oral sex, outdoor love); (3) Impersonal (e.g., watching others, fetishism, using objects for stimulation); and (4) Sadomasochistic (e.g., whipping or spanking, being forced). These four types of fantasy were positively correlated and were all more commonly reported by men, although women were almost as high on the Intimate factor. Women were also more likely to be passive or receptive in their fantasies, and men active. All fantasies were associated with high libido as indicated by self-rated sex drive and orgasm frequency, especially for women. In general, reports of many fantasies went with satisfaction in women but with dissatisfaction (frustration?) in men. This finding is explained in terms of the higher average level of libido in men than women, with the consequent difficulty experienced by men in acting out their desires.

INTRODUCTION

Although the importance of fantasies in the understanding of normal and deviant sexual behaviour is agreed upon by psychoanalytic and behavioural psychologists, information concerning the frequency and content of the sexual fantasies of normal men and women is sparse. Hariton and Singer (1974) and Brown and Hart (1977) dealt only with women's fantasies, while Giambra and Martin (1977) studied only men. These studies suggest that high levels of sexual fantasy are not uncommon in men or women but that there are considerable individual differences related to libido and experience. Studies which have used both male and female subjects (Barclay 1973; Mednick, 1977; McCauley and Swann, 1978) indicate that males tend to be active, impersonal and visually oriented in their fantasies, compared with women, whose fantasy themes are relatively passive and romantic. However, they do not provide a detailed quantification of fantasy patterns and they are based on samples of college students. This study uses the technique of factor analysis to examine the structure and correlates of sexual fantasies in a general population sample.

METHOD

A questionnaire was developed consisting of 40 recognized fantasy themes drawn from scientific and erotic literature. For each fantasy item, subjects were required to indicate their own frequency using the scale: never = 0, seldom = 1, occasionally = 2, sometimes = 3, often = 4, regularly = 5. This was repeated for 'daytime fantasies', 'fantasies during intercourse and masturbation' and 'dreams while asleep'. They were also asked how often they had performed each act in reality, and the extent to which they would like to do so in future. Following response to the 40 fantasy items, respondents were asked to choose their single most exciting theme from the list, describe any favourite fantasies that had been omitted in the questionnaire, and provide information about their background and life style. This questionnaire is given with scoring instructions in Wilson (1978).

Subjects were contacted by distributing questionnaires on London street corners chosen to provide a reasonable balance of social class. The questionnaires were returned anonymously using stamped, addressed envelopes supplied with them. The return rate was approximately 30%, and equal for men and women. The first 50 men and 50 women to return completed questionnaires were chosen for analysis, but these numbers were later reduced in order to make the male and female samples more comparable in marital and dating status. The final group consisted of 45 males and 45 females ranging in age from 18 to 40 and identical with respect to marital and dating status. Each gender group contained 9 married persons, 18 with steady partners, and 18 unattached. Unfortunately, balancing in this way meant that the male group averaged a few years older than the female group, but this did not seem important because age did not correlate with any of the fantasy scores within the range studied.

RESULTS

Since the fantasies occurring at different times were closely correlated, most of the following analysis is based on answers to the question about daytime fantasies only. The 40 fantasy items were factor analysed using the principal components method with promax rotation to reveal four primary factors: (1) Exploratory, including themes such as group sex, promiscuity, mate-swapping and homosexuality; (2) Intimate, including passionate kissing, oral sex, outdoor love and masturbating a partner; (3) Impersonal e.g., sex with strangers, watching others make love, fetishism, using objects for stimulation and looking at obscene pictures; and (4) Sadomasochistic e.g., whipping and spanking, being forced to have sex. Scoring 10 items on each of these four factors produced the means for men and women given in Table 1.
Table I. Mean scores (and SDs) on four fantasy factors for men and women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of fantasy</th>
<th>Men (IN = 45)</th>
<th>Women (IN = 45)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>12.18 (8.7)</td>
<td>4.44 (3.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimate</td>
<td>22.73 (11.7)</td>
<td>15.20 (11.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impersonal</td>
<td>9.18 (7.1)</td>
<td>2.36 (3.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadomasochistic</td>
<td>4.60 (6.9)</td>
<td>3.29 (4.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>48.69 (29.2)</td>
<td>25.29 (19.0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For both sexes, intimate fantasies occurred most frequently, followed by exploratory themes. Impersonal and sadomasochistic fantasies were much less common, especially in women. In fact, men scored higher on all four categories and, overall, reported about twice as much fantasy.

A factor that did not emerge in the principal components analysis, even though the questionnaire was designed to tap it, was that of active vs passive preferences. Many of the items appear in both active and passive form e.g., 'forcing someone to have sex', 'being forced to have sex'; 'seducing an innocent', 'being seduced as an innocent'; 'giving oral sex', 'receiving oral sex'. Apparently, this distinction had been swamped by the tendency for sadism and masochism to go together at one end of a more powerful factor. Nevertheless, when scores for active and passive fantasies were separately totalled, striking sex differences were obtained (Fig. 1). Whereas men are slightly more active than passive in their fantasies, women are very much more passive.

Since the four primary factors described above were positively intercorrelated, it appears that a general factor underlies reports of sexual fantasy of all kinds. The work of Eysenck (1976) would suggest that a factor of 'libido level', two-thirds of which appears to be genetically based, would be a likely candidate. Some support for this idea can be seen in the correlations between sexual fantasies and self-rated sex drive (Table 2). All of the fantasy types are positively related to libido, although this association is clearer for women (perhaps because there is greater variability in their libidos).

As Eysenck (1976) found, 'satisfaction with sex life' was fairly independent of libido, therefore it is possible to place the fantasy types within a two-dimensional space (Fig. 2). Apart from the generally positive association of fantasies with libido, this diagram shows how the different fantasy types relate to satisfaction. Intimate fantasies clearly go with satisfaction, while sadomasochistic and exploratory fantasies are, if anything, related to dissatisfaction. Impersonal fantasies seem to go with satisfaction in women and dissatisfaction in men. Overall, there is a tendency for fantasy to go with satisfaction in women but not in men (correlations of 0.32 and 0.04 respectively with total fantasy scores). In fact, in men, all fantasy categories other than the intimate show slight negative correlations with satisfaction. This tendency for fantasies to go with satisfaction in women and dissatisfaction in men is more striking with fantasies during intercourse and masturbation (Fig. 3). In this diagram, significantly loading fantasy items have been plotted individually so as to illustrate the gender difference in greater detail.

Table 2. Correlations among fantasy factors and three measures of libido and sexual activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of fantasy</th>
<th>Orgasm frequency</th>
<th>No. of partners</th>
<th>Rated sex drive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.42</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intimate</td>
<td>0.40</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Impersonal</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sadomasochistic</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>0.59</td>
<td>0.07</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Fig. 1. Mean scores on active and passive fantasy factors for men and women.
Fig. 2. The positions of four types of fantasy (daytime) in relation to independent axes of libido and satisfaction for men and women.

Fig. 3. Fantasies during intercourse and masturbation related to axes of libido and satisfaction in men and women (fantasies which did not significantly correlate with either axis have been omitted).
DISCUSSION

This study suggests that sexual fantasies play different roles in the lives of men and women. Fantasies in men, other than those of the intimate type, seem to signify some degree of frustration—manifestations of a sex drive that is not totally fulfilled. Women, however, seem to have more fantasies when their sex life is going well. One explanation for this would be that female fantasies are stimulated by, and to some extent dependent upon an intimate relationship with a man. (Most of their fantasies are in fact of the intimate variety). Whereas the sex drive of men is a fairly steady imperative, demanding some kind of outlet quite regularly, women may have the capacity to ‘turn off’ and become sexually quiescent for long periods of time in the absence of a loving relationship or desirable partner.

An alternative, or perhaps supplementary explanation is in terms of supply and demand. To a large extent, sexual pleasure is a commodity that is demanded by men and supplied (on condition) by women (because their sociobiological evolution determines greater promiscuity) then they are bound to have greater drive of men is a fairly steady imperative, demanding some kind of outlet quite regularly, women may have the explanation for this would be that female fantasies are stimulated by, and to some extent dependent upon an difficulty finding female partners with (or upon) whom to fulfil their desires. The result will be an excess of males with unfulfilled fantasies who complain about unsatisfactory sex lives. Likewise, those unusual women who are replete with male-type lust, and who are likely to be labelled nymphomaniac by ardent diagnosticians, will have little difficulty finding willing males, and they will not go unsatisfied for long. This argument is supported by the finding both in this study and in Eysenck’s work that men are higher in libido than women but women more satisfied with their sex lives. Support can also be seen in the correlations between fantasy and partner turnover (Table 2). Women who fantasize a great deal appear to translate their fantasies into experiences with a variety of different partners. The men are not so lucky; those with high levels of fantasy are no more successful with women than those without. For women it is little sooner desired than done—men frequently have to work hard to persuade women to cooperate in acting out their fantasies.

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REFERENCES


Eysenck’s personality analysis and position of the planets at birth: a replication on American subjects

MICHEL GAUQUELIN, FRANÇOISE GAUQUELIN and SYBIL B. G. EYSENCK

1Laboratoire d’Etude des Relations entre Rythmes Cosmiques et PsychophysioLOGIQUES, 8 rue Amyot, 75005 Paris, France; and
2Institute of Psychiatry, Department of Psychology, Denmark Hill, London SE5 8AF, U.K.

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Summary—Personality descriptions of successful American professionals were compiled from their biographies. The precise birth times, dates and locations of the 500 subjects were obtained from official American records. The precise positions of the planets Mars, Jupiter and Saturn were calculated for each person, with particular attention being paid to the period following the rise and the upper culmination of the respective planets. The results of this study on American data are in very good agreement with those of a similar study previously carried out by the authors on European data. A correlation between Eysenck’s personality dimensions and the position of the planets at birth was again found. Extraverts are significantly more frequently born when Mars and Jupiter had just risen or just passed their upper culmination; introverts when Saturn had just risen or just passed its upper culmination. Mars and Jupiter appear to be also associated with Psychoticism and Saturn associated with Non-Psychoticism. Again no positive effects were found for Neuroticism.

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