

What Exactly Is an Unusual Sexual Fantasy?

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Although several theories and treatment plans use unusual sexual fantasies (SF) as a way to identify deviancy, they seldom describe how the fantasies referred to were determined to be unusual.

Aim. The main goal of this study was to determine which SF are rare, unusual, common, or typical from a statistical point of view among a relatively large sample of adults recruited from the general population. A secondary goal was to provide a statistical comparison of the nature and intensity of sexual fantasies for men and women. This study also aims at demonstrating with both quantitative and qualitative analyses that certain fantasies often considered to be unusual are common.

Methods. An Internet survey was conducted with 1,516 adults (799 ♀; 717 ♂) who ranked 55 different SF and wrote their own favorite SF. Each SF was rated as statistically rare (2.3% or less), unusual (15.9% or less), common (more than 50%), or typical (more than 84.1% of the sample).

Main Outcome Measures. An extended version of the Wilson's Sex Fantasy Questionnaire with an open question.

Results. Only two sexual fantasies were found to be rare for women or men, while nine others were unusual. Thirty sexual fantasies were common for one or both genders, and only five were typical. These results were confirmed with qualitative analyses. Submission and domination themes were not only common for both men and women, but they were also significantly related to each other. Moreover, the presence of a single submissive fantasy was a significant predictor of overall scores for all SF in both genders.

Conclusion. Care should be taken before labeling an SF as unusual, let alone deviant. It suggested that the focus should be on the effect of a sexual fantasy rather than its content. **Joyal CC, Cossette A, and Lapierre V. What exactly is an unusual sexual fantasy? J Sex Med 2015;12:328–340.**

Key Words. Paraphilia; Sexual Fantasies; General Population

Introduction

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines paraphilia as unusual [1], atypical [2] or anomalous [3] sexual fantasies (or urges or behaviors, criterion A; see also criterion G1 of the ICD-10 [4]). What constitutes an unusual (or usual) sexual fantasy is not clear, however. Sexual fantasies (SFs) are generally defined as any mental imagery that is sexually arousing or erotic to the individual [5]. From a clinical point of view, determining when a sexual fantasy, usual or not, is a disorder is fairly straightforward: it is obligatory, compulsive, and/or results

in sexual dysfunction or causes distress or impairment to the individual (criteria B of the DSM-V and G2 of the ICD-10). From a legal perspective, a criminal sexual interest clearly involves a non-consenting or a minor partner. But beyond this, what exactly is an unusual SF? The DSM-5 and the ICD-10 provide roughly the same eight examples of unusual SF: fetishism, masochism, sadism (sado-masochism in the ICD-10), frotteurism, exhibitionism, pedophilia, transvestism, and voyeurism. The grounds on which these fantasies are considered unusual are not specified, however. Clarifying the ambiguous boundaries between usual and unusual SFs is important for both clinical and

theoretical purposes. Surprisingly, such clarification is seldom available.

A landmark review of the literature concerning the nature of SF of individuals recruited from outside clinical populations was published by Leitenberg and Henning nearly 20 years ago [5]. They reported that although both men and women tend to have similar fantasies, men seem to fantasize more about impersonal relationships and domination, whereas women seem to fantasize more about romance and submission. The authors stress, however, that their data were obtained largely from college students. Given that age (lower) and education (higher) are known to be associated with a greater diversity of sexual fantasies [6–10], in order to obtain a more accurate picture, participants should be recruited from outside college settings. Leitenberg and Henning [5] underlined another limit in studies of SF: their tendency to use cluster analyses and bias responses by reporting sexual interest related to items that have necessarily been preselected for inclusion in the questionnaire. It comes as no surprise, for instance, that questionnaires containing items related to sadomasochism will generate a statistical cluster of items related to sadomasochism (e.g., Ref. 11). In the same vein, one would expect that sadomasochist persons would obtain higher scores than others on a sadomasochistic subscale [12]. To partially avoid this circular logic, items used in closed-question questionnaires should be varied and selected on the basis of objective criteria. Furthermore, open questions should be included in the questionnaire.

We systematically reviewed the literature published since 1995 (or not included in Leitenberg and Henning) on SF among samples of individuals recruited from nonclinical settings in an attempt to determine which sexual fantasies are unusual. The search was exhaustive and performed with four major engines (Google Scholar, Web of Science, Medline, and Dissertation and Theses), using the keywords “sex,” “sexual fantasies,” “general,” and “general population” for studies published until the end of 2012. In all, 17 studies published in English or French were identified. As shown in Table 1, most of these studies are either based on samples of participants recruited in college settings or fail to provide inferential or comparative statistical analyses. One study used open questions with persons recruited among the community, although the qualitative analyses were based on a limited number of themes [22]. Only one study adopted a hybrid design (quantitative

and qualitative analyses), although it was limited to college female students [19]. Still, these studies confirm that although men tend to report a higher diversity of sexual fantasies than women, both genders acknowledge themes that are often labeled as unusual (Table 1; see also Ref. 36 for paraphilic interests, not fantasies, among college students).

Few investigations of SF have been performed with persons recruited from the general population. Ogas and Gaddam [37] compiled keywords entered in Internet search engines between July 2009 and July 2010 and found that among the 20 most popular sexual topics, 7 could be labeled unusual or abnormal (youth, incest, domination, submission, bestiality, transsexual, and grannies, in that order of incidence). Of course, this study was not directly related to individuals' fantasies and young educated males are overrepresented among Internet users searching for sexual content. Still, their findings make it possible to generate some hypotheses.

The same year, Ahlers and colleagues [30] reported that among 367 men aged between 40 and 79 and living in Berlin, more than half (58.6%) acknowledged at least one “paraphilic” SF, including voyeurism (34.9%), fetishism (30%), and sadism (21.8%). Again, these ratios might apply only to older and particularly libidinal men living in Berlin (the response rate was only 19%), but they contradict the idea that such fantasies are unusual or atypical. Five large-scale surveys of sexual fantasies or interests among samples representative of populations were recently obtained in Europe (in France: Brenot [9], $N = 2,153$ men, and Brenot [10], $N = 3,404$ women; French Institute of Public Opinion, 2009, $N = 1,016$ men and women [28], and French Institute of Public Opinion, 2011, [29] $N = 579$ women; in England: Khar [25,26], $N = 18,299$ men and women; see Table 1). However, none of these large-scale studies included quantitative (statistical) or qualitative analysis of the data. Basic statistical analyses are warranted to determine the extent of deviation from the norm, if any, of each sexual fantasy, as well as the level of difference, if any, between genders. Qualitative analyses of open responses are also needed to determine whether sexual interests related with themes not included in predetermined lists of items would emerge.

The cases of masochism and sadism are particularly interesting. First, clinical settings have typically considered these fantasy themes to be unusual (e.g., Ref. 38). Fantasies involving spanking, forcing someone to have sex, tying someone

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