



# Understanding the sexual fantasies of sex offenders and their correlates

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## ABSTRACT

Sexual fantasy is proposed to be an important factor in sexual offending. However, the existing research on this topic suggests that its role is multifaceted and interrelated with various other important factors associated with sexual offending. In this paper, we begin by examining some of the conceptual and definitional issues regarding the term ‘deviant sexual fantasy’. We then discuss the literature relating to sexual fantasies and some of its chief correlates, including: (1) sexual arousal, (2) affective states, (3) personality, and (4) behavior. Throughout the paper we discuss the relevant research and theories; identify possible areas for future research; and offer some suggestions for theoretical development.

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## 1. Introduction

Researchers and theorists have been emphasizing the role of deviant sexual fantasy in the etiology of sexual offending ever since *Abel and Blanchard (1974)* stressed its importance in the treatment of sexual deviation. This role has been and is still predominantly related to the acquisition and maintenance of deviant sexual interests via various conditioning and social learning processes (*Laws & Marshall, 1990; McGuire, Carlisle, & Young, 1965*). Considering that deviant sexual interests have been shown to be a key risk factor in sexual

offending (*Thornton, 2002*) as well as the strongest predictor of sexual recidivism (*Hanson & Bussière, 1998; Hanson & Morton-Bourgon, 2005*), the assumption that sexual fantasies are an important factor in understanding sexual offending appears more than plausible.

However, it has been argued that deviant sexual fantasies can have a more direct influence on sexual offending. For example, many researchers propose that the recurrent use of deviant sexual fantasies can lead to the commission of a sexual offence in some offenders, whereby the individual becomes motivated to enact the imagery they have mentally simulated within their fantasies (*Deu & Edelmann, 1997; MacCulloch, Snowden, Wood, & Mills, 1983; Ward & Hudson, 2000; Wilson & Jones, 2008*). Recent research has provided some support for this hypothesis. For instance, *Beech, Fisher, and Ward (2005)* found that, in a group of 14 sadistically-motivated sexual murderers, 79% reported ‘carrying out sexual fantasies’ as their main motivation for offending.

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Alternatively, others assert that deviant fantasies act as ‘disinhibitors’ that desensitize an individual to deviant behavior. This lowers their internal inhibitions against engaging in such behavior and, therefore, increases the likelihood of offending (Gee, Devilly, & Ward, 2004). Indeed, based on official records and interview data, Proulx, Perreault, and Ouimet (1999) found that for extrafamilial child molesters, deviant fantasies were one of the most frequently reported immediate (12-h) disinhibitors.

Deviant sexual fantasy is, therefore, a factor worthy of both clinical and academic attention. However, as Hudson and Ward (2000) note, it is unlikely that deviant sexual fantasy alone will predict future offending in isolation from other factors related to the offender. Indeed, research has shown that sexual fantasies are interrelated with other key factors such as emotional states and sexual arousal. For example, Gee, Ward, and Eccleston (2003) qualitatively analyzed the interview transcripts of 24 sex offenders and found that sexual fantasies can be used to: (a) regulate affect, (b) enhance/induce sexual arousal, (c) cope, and (d) re-live an offense or simulate a future offense. Researchers also assert that sexual fantasy use is dependent upon the disposition and motivation of the sex offender (e.g., Langton & Marshall, 2001; Ward, Hudson, & Keenan, 1998). For example, Langton and Marshall explain that sexual sadistic rapists use deviant sexual fantasies for sexual pleasure, whereas sexual nonsadistic rapists use deviant fantasies as a way of compensating for their low masculine self-image and sexual inadequacy. Thus, given that deviant fantasies interrelate significantly with other factors associated with a sexual offender, it appears as though their role is not as straightforward as first thought. Thus, the current paper aims to describe and synthesize research and relevant theory related to deviant sexual fantasy and its various correlates. We begin with a detailed discussion on the definition of deviant sexual fantasy before moving on to discuss some of the main factors that are associated with sex offenders’ fantasies. These include deviant sexual interest/arousal, affective states, personality, and behavior. We end with an overall summary and considerations for future research.

## 2. Defining deviant sexual fantasy

Various terms have been used to refer to the sexual fantasies of sex offenders, such as *coercive fantasies* (Drieschner & Lange, 1999), *paraphilic fantasies* (O’Donohue, Letourneau, & Dowling, 1997), and *lapses* (Pithers, Kashima, Cummings, & Beal, 1988). However, the most widely used term is *deviant sexual fantasy*. The use of this more general term is perhaps understandable as the other terms appear more specific. For example, ‘coercive fantasy’ is used mainly in articles about rape, whereas ‘paraphilic fantasy’ can refer to any one of the paraphilias as defined by the DSM-IV (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), some of which are sexual offenses (e.g., pedophilia) and some of which are not (e.g., transvestic fetishism).

Although the term ‘deviant sexual fantasy’ is evidently preferred within the literature, there appears to be no formal definition of the term. Instead, authors tend to provide definitions for sexual fantasy more generally, which embody the relationship between fantasy content and arousal. To illustrate, Rokach (1990) defines sexual fantasy as any daydreaming that includes erotica and that is sexually arousing. Similarly, Leitenberg and Henning (1995) regard sexual fantasy as being almost any imagery that is sexually arousing or erotic to the individual. Such definitions are understandably broad because the process of defining sexually arousing imagery, and therefore a sexual fantasy, is highly subjective, requiring the acknowledgement of specific behaviors (Swaffer, Hollin, Beech, Beckett, & Fisher, 2000). However, it can be argued that this process is less subjective in relation to deviant sexual fantasies as the imagery contains a more specific set of behaviors (i.e., those that are deviant).

A major problem, however, is that questionnaire and self-report studies show that non-offending individuals also entertain deviant sexual fantasies, which raises questions as to what can be classed as

a ‘deviant’ fantasy. For example, Williams, Cooper, Howell, Yuille, and Paulhus (2009) found that, in a sample of 103 undergraduate males, 95% reported having experienced at least one sexually deviant fantasy during their lifetime. More specifically, many non-offending males self-report fantasies involving dominance, force, and coercion (e.g., Bartels & Gannon, 2009; Crépault & Couture, 1980; Gold & Clegg, 1990; Greendlinger & Byrne, 1987; Zurbriggen & Yost, 2004), and sadism (Gray, Watt, Hassan, & MacCulloch, 2003). For instance, although a time period was not provided (e.g., over a lifetime, 12 months), Crépault and Couture report that 33% of their non-offending sample admitted to masturbating to fantasies of raping a woman. They also found that 61% fantasized about sexually initiating a young girl (although it was not stated whether this referred to an underage girl). Other research has demonstrated that some non-offenders fantasize about children (Becker-Blease, Friend, & Freyd, 2006; Briere & Runtz, 1989; Smiljanich & Briere, 1996). For instance, Becker-Blease et al. found that, in a sample of 531 undergraduate males, 18% reported fantasizing about child sexual abuse within the last 12 months. In all, this body of research suggests that deviant sexual imagery is “within the normal realm of human experience” (Gee et al., 2004, p. 51), raising questions about what exactly constitutes a deviant fantasy.

Gee et al. (2004) coined the term “offense-focused fantasy” as a means of distinguishing between the offense-based fantasies reported by sex offenders and those reported within non-offending populations, in order to reduce the problems associated with the term ‘deviant fantasy’ (Gee et al., 2004). Gee et al. state that offense-focused fantasies contain “sexually deviant material that, if acted out, would legally constitute a sexual offense” (Gee et al., 2004, p. 323). It is unclear, however, as to how the offense-focused content differs from the deviant imagery reported by non-offending individuals, since fantasies about raping a woman or having sex with a child, as reported by some non-offending males (e.g., Crépault & Couture; Becker-Blease et al.), would also clearly constitute a sexual offense if acted out.

The Oxford Dictionary defines *deviant* as a “(thing or person) that deviates from normal behavior”. Thus, research showing that deviant fantasies are reported by non-offending populations renders the term ‘deviant’ a misnomer in relation to sexual fantasies. This point was highlighted by Leitenberg and Henning (1995), who asserted that the term deviant sexual fantasy is misleading if not directly linked to deviant sexual behavior. Perhaps a more accurate term would be ‘fantasies containing deviant behavior’. As a consequence, Leitenberg and Henning suggest that attention should be given to individuals whose barriers between fantasy and behavior are broken. Also, since research has shown that 95% of non-offenders report using at least one deviant fantasy during their life (Williams et al., 2009), particular attention should be directed to those individuals who have a preoccupation or overreliance on deviant sexual fantasies (Stein, 2007).

Another problematic area involved in defining sexual fantasy that has not received much attention, especially within the forensic domain, concerns the actual conceptualization of the term *fantasy*. Psychoanalytic writers have often characterized fantasy as being a mental image that contains a group of symbols unified into a script or story (Beres, 1960; Rokach, 1990), whereas Prentky et al. (1989), drawing upon information-processing theory, define fantasy as being an “elaborated set of cognitions (or thoughts) characterized by preoccupation (or rehearsal), anchored in emotion, and originating in daydreams” (p. 889). Regardless of their theoretical differences, both definitions share two facets. The first is the assumption that fantasies occur internally or within the mind, evident from the use of the terms ‘mental image’ and ‘cognition’. The second feature refers to the nature of a fantasy, in that, they are ‘script’ or ‘story’-like and ‘elaborate’.

This second feature appears to distinguish fantasies from static mental images or fleeting thoughts. However, some researchers assert that *sexual* fantasies can be both an elaborated story or a

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