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# Sexual Fantasies

At the Convergence of the  
Cultural and the Individual



## **Introduction: At the Convergence of the Cultural and the Individual**

Fantasy and imagination are vital parts of what makes us human beings. Our capacity to form mental images or concepts of things that are not actually present, together with our ability to let our minds and imaginations wander, aid us in our everyday lives. Although we can fantasise about many different things – from positive daydreaming about more or less attainable goals to nightmare visions about accidents or illnesses – one significant aspect of fantasy has to do with our sexual worlds. Sexual fantasies might be shameful or embarrassing, they might create awkwardness in real-life situations, or a questioning of one's own sexual identity, but they might also be rich and rewarding, a path that leads to exploration, self-discovery, and pleasure. Moreover, they contain a weird paradox: on the one hand, they are the most private and secretive in people's lives (some never admit their sexual fantasies even to a partner who is very close); on the other hand, they are both shared by many and, in some way, dependent on a world that supplies structures, images, symbols, narratives, and so on, that can be deployed in various ways within those fantasies. On the one hand, fantasies emanate from the individual; on the other, they are produced in interaction with the world around us.

Using the terminology from sexual script theory by Simon and Gagnon (e.g., 2005[1973]; 1986), one could say that sexual fantasies are the place where the cultural scenario and the intrapsychic script converge and/or conflict. Sociologists Simon and Gagnon presented the sexual script theory in the early 1970s, and developed it through the years to come. 'Script' is a metaphor for how sexuality is not biologically determined but shaped in and by a social context. From an early age, individuals form their perception of sexuality through various bits and pieces of information; through taboos and misapprehensions; through sex education and other informational materials; through glimpses snatched from films, literature, and real life; through experiences and feelings aroused by erotica or pornography. Simon and Gagnon describe scripting as occurring on three different levels. The first one is that of the intrapsychic, or individual, scripts. At first glance, this is where sexual fantasies are located – they are a 'symbolic reorganization of reality in ways that make it complicit in realizing more fully the actor's many-layered and sometimes multivoiced wishes' (Simon & Gagnon 1986: 99). As personal, private,

and (often) secret parts of the self, sexual fantasies quite definitely belong within the intrapsychic scripts. The second level is that of the interpersonal scripts – here, two or more people interact in accordance with both expected codes of conduct within sexual activity and with their own intrapsychic scripts. As Simon and Gagnon explain it, the scripts in this case are rather a kind of template or a set of instructions for improvisation. For instance, that sex is ‘supposed to’ begin with kissing and petting in order to continue on to penetration and intercourse, is such a template within which two or more people can improvise. Included in the interpersonal script is everything from flirting to post-coital behaviour.

The cultural scenario is the third level. This is at once quite abstract and quite concrete: the cultural scenario provides the information from which individuals piece together their knowledge about sex, the inspiration for the personal, intrapsychic scripts, as well as a backdrop – or even a stage – for our interpersonal scripts. It is both a contemporary social context and a historical legacy of cultural tradition.

In this volume, we mainly approach sexual fantasies as they are expressed, conveyed, and disseminated on a cultural level, for instance through various media. This is not because we find that the research done on individuals’ sexual fantasies is faulty, or even looking in the wrong places, but rather because we want to expand the notion of sexual fantasies from the field of psychology and into the realm of cultural studies, anthropology, philosophy, sociology, and analyses of cultural phenomena. Our conviction is that individuals’ sexual fantasies cannot be understood without the backdrop of social culture, or, in Simon and Gagnon’s terminology, the cultural scenario. Accordingly, the contributors ask questions about how such fantasies may be navigated in the convergence with the personal on an individual level but also how such fantasies are understood or interpreted in society, what they might mean in a given social culture, and what effects they may have. In a review of research on sexual fantasies, Leitenberg and Henning observe: ‘Certainly it is by now a truism that one’s brain is at least as important a sexual organ as one’s genitals. [...] Understanding sexual fantasies therefore seems central to an understanding of an important aspect of human sexuality’ (1995: 469). We might, however, add that understanding sexual fantasies is an important aspect of understanding our culture, and that our culture is one way to understand sexual fantasies. Fantasy, as Cultural Studies scholar Martin Barker observes, belongs ‘in the zone of the relations between bodies, selfhood, and social and cultural permissions and forbiddings’ (Barker 2014: 157).

Thus, the emphasis in this volume is not on mapping the prevalence of particular fantasies in certain people, but on how sexual fantasies can be multifaceted and ubiquitous; how they may be individualised but seldom unique; and how they

interconnect with a multitude of other psychological, social, and cultural phenomena. This volume also examines how sexual fantasies and their various expressions may be used for liberating ends, such as exploring one's sexuality in therapy, and for finding alternatives to stereotypical depictions of sexuality.

## Secret gardens

Since people are secretive about them, sexual fantasies are hard to research. Previous studies have attempted to investigate people's sexual fantasies by surveys, open-ended questionnaires, or by asking subjects to record their fantasies in journals over an extended period of time (Leitenberg & Henning 1995). These methods are problematic, since they – like much sexological research – rely on honesty in a subject that is fraught with taboos, social norms, conventions, expectations, and even legal regulations. Nonetheless, researchers have reached some tentative results regarding sexual fantasies in individuals as relates to gender, age, and correlation to for instance sex crimes (Leitenberg & Henning 1995).

There are collections of sexual fantasies, where people have submitted their fantasies in writing or in taped interviews. Nancy Friday's classic, bestselling *My Secret Garden: Women's Sexual Fantasies* (1973) is one such collection. Born out of the sexual revolution, second wave feminism, and the curiosity about sexuality which permeated much of the late 1960s and early 1970s, *My Secret Garden* is not a scholarly book – Friday made requests for sexual fantasies through ads and articles, thus creating a selection of fantasies which came from those who would offer them – but it does not really make that claim, either. Instead, it is written as a call for liberation (from shame, guilt, and oppression by the ideal of the 'good girl') and openness. Friday would go on to write about (among other things) men's sexual fantasies (1980) and returned to women's sexual fantasies in later publications (1991; 2009).

Another form of sexual fantasy research is the psychologist or therapist who relates a number of cases and discusses what the fantasies might mean to the individual who has them and how he or she can be able to negotiate, for instance, a tension between everyday sexual life and fantasy (see e.g., Bader 2002; Kahr 2009). Here, the sexual fantasy might cause problems that need to be resolved in order to establish a functioning intimate relation. One such example, where the fantasy fetish had led to a cessation of sexual activity between husband and wife, is, together with the therapy treatment, described in McCarthy and Breetz 'Confronting Male Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder: Secrets, Variant Arousal, and Good-Enough Sex' (2010).

Through its on the one hand graphic explicitness and its on the other hand role as fantasy, pornography holds a paradoxical position in relation to fantasy and reality (Barker 2014). The legalisation of pornography in the Western world during the 1970s, as well as the severe debates around pornography, gender, and sexuality from the late 1970s and into the 1990s, brought a new kind of discussion about what sexual representations are and how they relate to actual sexual practices, as well as to dominant ideology and hegemonic conceptions.

For instance, are women's rape fantasies an expression of an inherent wish in women to be dominated by men – is femininity masochist by nature? Or are they a way for women to allow themselves to enjoy sex, to not have to bear the responsibility of sexual activity because someone else made them do it, the so-called blame avoidance theory? Or is it just an example of how women have internalised patriarchal oppression and come to embrace sexuality as male domination and, even, violence? Might it be that women dream of being so desirable that men cannot resist them? All of these – and other – explanations have been proposed through the years and none is really sufficient (Bivona, Critelli & Clark 2012). When men fantasise about being dominated, is it because they need relief from the role of always being powerful, in control, active, and aggressive?

Although more women than men seem to fantasise about being dominated in one way or the other (being tied up, raped, beaten/whipped etc.), studies show very varied results on how many women actually have such fantasies. Between 31% and 57% of women have had fantasies of being forced into sex, but for only between 9% and 17% such fantasies are frequent or favored (Critelli & Bivona 2008). Thus, to say that it is a common female fantasy is actually very likely something of an exaggeration. It can be said that it is not uncommon for women to have such fantasies, but the only way it could be described as common is by ascribing fantasies of submission a negative character (like colds or Chlamydia are common). Nonetheless, since these fantasies are highly controversial, they become highlighted in reports of research. Explanations become politicised, because such fantasies could seem to endorse rape myths, such as the idea that women want to be overpowered, or they could cement gender roles such as that women are passive and men active.

Nonetheless, in research, it seems that sexual fantasies have little bearing on life outside the bedroom – sometimes even outside the mind and body of the fantasiser (Leitenberg & Henning 1995). Only a very small number of individuals act out fantasies that could be harmful to others or to themselves (about rape, sex with minors, asphyxiation, violence). Although some fantasies may have a correlation to attitudes, this applies to men who fantasise about dominating a woman and who have stronger rape myth acceptance, and not to women who

have rape fantasies (Zurbriggen & Yost 2004). Some people have fantasies that do not have an equivalent in their sex lives – for instance heterosexuals who fantasise about sex with someone of the same sex.

Thus, from a socio-political perspective it might seem that it is of little importance what people fantasise about. However, Michael Kimmel and Rebecca F Plante argue that sexual fantasies reflect the social construction of gender in society in general (Kimmel & Plante 2005). In sharp contrast with biologically oriented explanatory models, Kimmel and Plante claim that gender differences in sexual fantasising come out of ‘deep social structures. Differential sexual scripting, with the goal of reinforcing socially constructed gender role identities, is the primary axis of disparity. With socialization into a binary gender system that also assumes heterosexuality, gender is enormously powerful in the construction of the sexual self’ (Kimmel & Plante 2005: 62). For Kimmel and Plante, the ‘grey areas between fantasies and realities’ are rather the result of reality’s (in the form of social structures) influence on fantasy, and a palpable gender disparity in sexual fantasies is likely to cause problems in intimate, heterosexual relations (2005: 63). With script theory terminology, gender differences in the cultural scenario influence the intrapsychic scripts, which in their turn translate into a possibly problematic (heterosexual) interpersonal interaction.

This might be a more convincing explanation for gender differences in sexual fantasies than, for instance, claiming that fantasies involving multiple partners are typically male fantasies because of a biologically male imperative to reproduce with many women whereas women more often fantasise about famous men because they need a strong provider (Wilson 1997). One reason is that the pervasiveness of such fantasies is not significant enough to substantiate such claims. Although the group sex fantasy seems quite common among men (42%), the famous person fantasy for women was only slightly more frequent than for men (17% versus 16%) (Wilson 1997). In the study by Kimmel and Plante (2005), the famous person fantasy was actually more common among men (6.59% as compared to 1.61%).

Two neuroscientists, Ogas and Gaddam (2011) have used Internet searches for sexual content in order to describe and explain the human sexual mind. Arguing for their method, they refer to an experiment on anonymity conducted in the 1970s in which a psychologist let people enter a completely darkened room (Gergen 1973). Some of the subjects took the opportunity to touch and kiss, and almost 80% reported sexual excitement (Ogas & Gaddam 2011: 6). The Internet, Ogas and Gaddam claim, is like ‘put[ting] a billion anonymous people in a virtually darkened room’ (ibid.: 6).

Of course, the perceived anonymity of the Internet provides an occasion for people to do things they otherwise would be too embarrassed or ashamed to do.

However, the motivation for the searches that Ogas and Gaddam have compiled and investigated may rather be fantasy than reality. Simply finding out what people do when they believe they are completely and safely anonymous, does not readily allow itself to be interpreted as having found out the truth about what people want. An important reason to question both Ogas and Gaddam and Wilson is that, as mentioned before, fantasies do not necessarily guide our actions in real life. And if and when they do, they might not do so in predictable and universal ways. The potential impact of fantasies on everyday life has to do with whether they provoke a sense of shame or of joy, how the individual organises his or her sex life in practice, how much space the actual fantasies may be given (or demand), whether they facilitate or complicate interactions with others, and so on.

As we see it, our fantasies are informed and shaped by the world and others, and the cultural and the individual live in a constant dialogue with one another. Since human beings are social, our private fantasies are not sanctuaries free of civilisation's dos and don'ts but neither are our social situations completely out of our control, because we shape them by our interactions in them. One of the recurring themes in this volume has to do with the relation between fantasy and reality. Issues that come up are whether fantasies can have an effect on us and our dispositions even though they are not acted out; what happens when a potentially dangerous fantasy is acted upon and put into practice in reality; how we understand and experience fantasy although we know it is not for real; the consequences when reality does not meet our fantasised expectations; or what happens when our fear of actual abuse in reality guides our regulation of the mind; and so on.

The comparatively small correlation between what people fantasise about and what they actually do in real life may be hard to accept. Partly, perhaps, because we want to believe that people's inner lives are more true and authentic than the selves they present to the world. Accordingly, by looking into what people 'really' think, we tend to think – like Ogas and Gaddam – that we can achieve a greater knowledge of what people are 'really' like. The notion of a 'true', hidden self comes out of a vulgarised Freudian conception of the world within which civilisation is regarded as forcing us into controlling our true natures. On the other hand, radical feminist theories that claim that women internalise patriarchal dominance and male violence – thus explaining feminine masochism by such a complete socialisation as to overpower even individual agency and free will (e.g., Brownmiller 1975) – bring that conception to its logical end point. At the other end of the spectrum, however, explanations that come out of socio-biological theories, neurology, or evolutionary psychology are no more open to the agency of the human mind.

We avoid placing any value judgements on the fantasies presented in this volume. Sexual fantasies cannot be expected to be politically correct, no more than they can be regarded as revealing of a true self or explained by theories of internalisation. In addition, for all of the contributors to this volume, the aim has mainly been to understand rather than to prescribe. For example, although we do discuss, as in Daniel D. Hutto's chapter, women's rape fantasies, these are used as an example to test the credibility of pretend theory – which denies that we have true emotions in response to something that we know is fiction.

Another recurring theme in the contributions is the distinction between sexual fantasies – arousing, erotic fantasies – and fantasies about sex, that may be arousing and feed into our sexual fantasies but may also have other functions. One example would be pornography, which contains several fantasies about sex, such as a plenitude of sexual pleasure; large, erect penises, insatiable participants, and so on. At the same time, it is quite obvious that pornography functions not only as a fantastic space for sex (as 'pornotopia') but also has strong connections to what people actually fantasise about. Another example would be the fantasies we create about the Other – be it a political Other or the religious and cultural Other as Western conceptions about the Oriental Harem.

## Chapters and contributors

The chapters of *Sexual Fantasies: At the Convergence of the Cultural and the Individual* are located within different scholarly practices. The contributors come from not only philosophy and psychology, but social anthropology, sociology, social work, film, media and cultural studies, science and technology studies, and gender studies. They use a variety of theoretical approaches and methods. Some chapters are more argumentative, others more descriptive. Several of the contributors are sexuality scholars teaching at the masters' program in Sexology at Malmö University in Sweden, and moreover, their research is associated with the newly started Center for Sexology and Sexuality Studies also at Malmö University. In addition, the editors have striven towards coherence and scholarly exchange through two workshops, one arranged early on in the work on the volume and the second held only a few months before the final deadline. Almost all contributors have participated in at least one of these workshops.

Comics and sexuality scholar Emma Vossen opens this volume with a defense of the bestselling erotic *Fifty Shades*-trilogy. The enormous success of these novels by E.L. James which began as fan fiction to the Twilight novels has prompted questions of what women actually want and a quite massive critique of the trilogy as lousy literature, both for its ostensibly low literary quality but also because it is



regarded as antifeminist for encouraging abusive, misogynistic relationships. In her chapter, Vossen argues that both criticisms stem from the problem of viewing the book as a work of 'literature' as opposed to one of pornography. What women desire in pornography (and fiction) does not directly translate into what they want in a real life relationship.

Continuing on the theme of written erotica, anthropologist Sara Johnsdotter explores the way sexual fantasies are encoded in language through written narratives. Focusing on the use of the word 'cum' in written erotica, Johnsdotter describes a transformation in the meaning of the word since it began to refer to female cum as well as traditionally, male ejaculate. What is often called 'dirty talk' is a significant element in sexual excitement, used within pornography, fantasy, written erotica, and between sexual partners. In written erotica, words are what is available in order to induce sexual feelings and arousal in the reader. While erotic narration offers free reign for fantasy, depicting all kinds of activities that could be socially, culturally, and possibly criminally taboo in real, non-fictional, social interaction, it is still regulated by standardised genre-specific scripts and subcultural standards: some fantasised scenarios seem to work better than others to elicit sexual arousal.

Deborah Blizzard takes on a very different projection of sexual fantasy. In 'Making the Fantasy: Consumption, Relationships, and the RealDoll', Blizzard turns the attention to sex dolls, more particularly the RealDoll. Technological advancement has made it possible to make quite life-like dolls, and the RealDoll began to be marketed in 1996. Blizzard discusses what the representation of the human body in the form of a doll that promises to be perfect might mean, both to the purchaser of such a doll and on a larger, societal scale.

The West has been accused of constructing an eroticised Other, especially with regard to the veil. Hence the *unveiling* of the oriental woman can be regarded as a classical Western sexual fantasy. In 'The Politics of Sexual Fantasies: The Inversion of Sexual Fantasies in Orientalism and Occidentalism', ethnic relations scholar Pernilla Ouis deconstructs Western fantasies about the Oriental, sexual Other, as well as Oriental conceptions about the sexualised West. These types of sexual fantasies and ethnopornography have had and still have political implications for the conquest and submission of the Other.

The role of sex as a religious motif and religious views on sexual fantasies is explored by anthropologist Aje Carlbon in 'Blocking out Sexual Fantasies for a Fantasy of Eternal Sex: Islamist views'. Carlbon, whose anthropological research has concerned Islam and Islamism, discusses both how a paradise of sexual abundance is promised for the afterlife of the devout Muslim and how imams relate to sexual fantasies that are disclosed in online sexual advice-seeking.

Focusing on what happens when sexual fantasies – even potentially dangerous sexual fantasies – are put into practice, Charlotta Carlström has contributed with a chapter on BDSM (an acronym for Bondage, Dominance, Submission, Sadomasochism). Carlström received her Masters degree in sexology at Malmö University and is currently working on a PhD project on BDSM. Her contribution focuses on the ritualistic aspects of BDSM and how fantasy is transposed into real life sexual practices in interpersonal, intimate relationships.

Carlström uses interviews with BDSM practitioners as empirical material in her research. Although also focusing on BDSM as fantasy and practice, Ingrid Ryberg, on the other hand, is a film scholar and consequently uses a different material to discuss political fantasies and expanded realities. Her chapter examines how two films, Morty Diamond's *Trans Entities: The Nasty Love of Papi and Wil* (2007), and Emilie Jouvett's *Much More Pussy* (2010), treat 'reconciliation' between fantasy and reality in queer, feminist, and lesbian sexual representations. Ryberg considers how in the two films fantasy, rather than being reconciled with reality, unsettles it and therefore potentially expands reality and everyday lives.

The relation between reality and fantasy, as visualised in images, is the topic of the next chapter, as well. In 'Fantasies Made Illegal', film and sexuality scholar Mariah Larsson discusses the criminalisation of child pornographic drawings, using a Swedish court case as example. Larsson considers the laws regulating child porn, especially images that do not have a 'real' object. Swedish law makes a distinction between graphic images of any kind and written narratives about sex. The latter are protected by the Swedish constitution under freedom of expression and freedom of the press. Whether an image of a child in a sexual situation is degrading to all children, regardless of whether it is an actual photograph or a computer generated image, is at issue.

Sven-Axel Månsson's research on sex work and prostitution spans five decades. He has been involved as an expert in official inquiries on sex work and on violence against women. In this chapter, he takes a closer look at the sexual fantasies of men who seek sex from female sex workers. By way of the numerous studies that have been made on sex work and prostitution, Månsson pieces together various themes that seem to be prevalent among men who pay for sexual services. Some of these themes are continuous, whereas others seem to be changing. Some are overtly sexual and have to do with for instance an idea of the skillful, 'bad' woman, whereas others have more to do with how the client perceives himself.

Philosopher Daniel D. Hutto contributes with an inquiry into the well-known puzzle concerning the rationality of our responses to fiction. 'Just Faking It? Pretend Theory Meets Sexual Fantasising' discusses, as mentioned above, the paradox of fiction. Using women's rape fantasies as a case study, Hutto compares two

competing, fundamentally different, frameworks for understanding the mind. On the one hand, classic cognitivism sees the computational manipulation of subpersonal representations as the essence of mental life. Opposing this is radical enactivism, which characterises cognition in terms of non-representational embodied interactions. Radical enactivism assumes that contentful and discursive forms of cognition exist, but that they only emerge when individuals successfully master socially grounded practices, such as the creation of narratives.

Concluding this volume is Gunnel Brander's chapter, which deals with how sexual fantasies can be used in therapy, and what they might mean for an individual, both sexually and in everyday life. In some cases, the disclosure of sexual fantasies to a partner can evoke feelings of disgust or estrangement. In others, even a completely secret fantasy can diminish a person's sense of self and bring on self-doubt and anxiety. Conversely, the lack of sexual fantasies can lead to loss of self-confidence and ability to claim a necessary space for oneself. Brander draws from rich experience and knowledge after having worked for many years in therapy, couples therapy, and sex therapy. In addition, she has taught sexology and sexuality studies at Malmö University.

In one way, these last two chapters encompass the approaches of the contributions to this volume. The philosophical perspective questions easy assumptions about how the mind works. Elaborate cognitive processes that we still know little about cannot be explained by simple cause-and-effect logic. As we are interested in what happens between the individual and the surrounding world, the discussion of how the brain understands fiction is significant. The abstract reasoning of the philosopher, however, does not preclude very empirical and hands-on accounts of the possible uses of sexual fantasies. Rather, Brander's contribution points to how, with a humble, respectful, and non-normative approach, therapists can find a helpful tool in their clients' sexual fantasies.

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