



SEXUAL FANTASIES, GENDER, AND MOLESTATION HISTORY

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Abstract—A total of 314 university students (107 males and 207 females) completed a questionnaire examining reports of childhood sexual abuse history and extent and type of adult sexual fantasies. Multivariate main effects of gender and abuse history were found, as well as a multivariate interaction between these variables. Males had more fantasies of forcing someone to have intercourse with them, participating in an orgy, and having sex with a stranger. Subjects with histories of sexual abuse had more sexual fantasies than their nonabused peers in four of five categories. Finally, sexually abused women reported more fantasies of being sexually forced than did women without sexual abuse histories or men regardless of molestation history. In several instances, fantasies correlated with especially early and extended abuse.

Key Words—Sexual abuse, Sexual fantasies, Adult abuse survivors.

INTRODUCTION

SINCE THE TIME of Freud, considerable attention has been paid to the incidence, content, and function of sexual fantasies. Despite early beliefs to the contrary, it is now generally accepted that such fantasies are quite common in the general population (Arndt, Foehl, & Good, 1985; Fisher, 1973; Knafo & Jaffe, 1984). The study of sexual fantasy production has, at various times, implicated psychopathological processes (e.g., Duetsch, 1944; Freud, 1962), normal sexual responses (e.g., Hariton & Singer, 1972; Knafo & Jaffe, 1984), and positive psychosexual functioning (e.g., Epstein & Smith, 1957; Sue, 1979). In the same vein, it has been hypothesized that the content of sexual fantasy reflects repressed sexual wishes unlikely to be acted upon (Freud, 1962), whereas others suggest the reverse, that such fantasies mirror actual sexual experience (Gold & Chick, 1988; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin, & Gebhardt, 1953; Knafo & Jaffe, 1984).

Some of the variability in theory and research findings may be due to individual differences in fantasy themes and motivation. For example, fantasy content might vary according to the

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fantasizer's psychological state or characteristics. Additionally, given differential sex-role conditioning of males and females in our society regarding sexual behavior, one might expect sex differences in fantasy content.

In support of the potential diversity of fantasy themes and fantasizers, Arndt and colleagues (1985) factor analyzed university students' sexual fantasies, and reported that not only were such fantasies multidimensional in nature, but that different types of fantasy themes were associated with different subject characteristics. Women tended to have fantasies involving romance, sexual variety, physical suffering, and dominance, whereas men had fantasies of using force, having same sex contacts, engaging in "unpopular" activities, and possessing "macho" attractiveness. Similarly, Knafo and Jaffe (1984) found that university males were more likely to endorse the fantasy "I imagine that I rape or humiliate a woman or women," for example, whereas women more frequently reported the fantasy "I imagine that I am being overpowered or forced to surrender." Interestingly, Kanin's (1983) study of women's "rape fantasies" suggests that, in many cases, these fantasies were "something quite different from rape. . . they appeared to be reporting erotic fantasies about being aggressively approached and sexually engaged, but in situations where they offer only token verbal resistance, if any, to a highly desired encounter" (p. 116).

It is the clinical impression of some psychotherapists that adults molested as children engage in sexual fantasy quite frequently, and that sexually abused women may be especially prone to sexual fantasies of being dominated and forced into sex, or of involvement in sexual interactions that contain explicitly violent or aggressive themes (Briere, 1992). Unfortunately, although there are some data on sex differences, there is little research or theory available on the relationship between childhood sexual abuse and later sexual fantasies. One of the few studies in this area indicates that, as compared to nonabused women, women with sexual abuse histories are more likely to have sexual fantasies involving force (Gold, 1991). Less clear, however, is whether such differences are due to sexual abuse alone, or the interaction of sexual abuse and female gender. In support of the former possibility, Finkelhor and Browne (1985) suggest that adults molested as children have undergone "traumatic sexualization" as a result of their victimization, such that they are more prone to preoccupation with sex and are more likely to engage in higher rates of sexual behavior (e.g., Briere, 1989; Briere & Runtz, 1990a; Courtois, 1988; Maltz & Holman, 1987). Additionally, several studies of former sexual abuse victims report a greater proclivity towards dissociation among such individuals, including behaviors such as daydreaming and fantasy (e.g., Briere & Runtz, 1990b; Putnam, 1989). Such findings might explain the greater frequency or diversity of sexual fantasies hypothesized for abuse survivors, although they would not explain any tendency toward having force fantasies, per se, nor the clinical hypothesis that sexually abused women, in particular, are more prone to such fantasies.

Given this dearth of information, a number of items about sexual fantasies were included in a larger study of the long-term sequelae of sexual child abuse among university students. Specific hypotheses were as suggested above: (a) males would have more fantasies about forcing others into sex, (b) adults molested as children would have more frequent sexual fantasies with a variety of themes, and (c) women with abuse histories would especially report themes involving being forced into sexual intercourse. It was further hypothesized that certain characteristics of subjects' sexual abuse experiences might be associated with the type of fantasies they reported. The direction of these associations, however, was not predicted.

METHOD

A total of 339 students from a state university and a community college completed a questionnaire examining, among other variables, self-reported history of childhood sexual

Table 1. Frequency of Six Sexual Fantasies

Fantasy Type	Never	2	3	4	Very often
	1				5
Consenting	44 (13.4)	45 (13.7)	83 (25.3)	75 (22.9)	81 (24.7)
Forcing	258 (78.7)	37 (11.3)	19 (5.8)	9 (2.7)	5 (1.5)
Being forced	232 (71.6)	46 (14.2)	26 (8.0)	15 (4.6)	5 (1.5)
Orgy	228 (70.4)	41 (12.7)	35 (10.8)	12 (3.7)	8 (2.5)
Stranger	177 (54.0)	46 (14.0)	58 (17.7)	30 (9.1)	17 (5.2)
Child	315 (96.0)	11 (3.4)	1 (0.3)	0 (0.3)	1 (0.3)

Note. Sample size ranges from 324 to 328 due to missing values. Numbers in parentheses represent relative percentages.

abuse and frequency of a variety of sexual fantasies. The questionnaire was described as a "study of the family, sexual behavior, and personal feelings," and subjects were explicitly informed of the potentially sensitive subject matter contained therein. Questionnaires were completed out of class in groups of 10 to 30, and subjects were informed of their option to discontinue participation at any time. No subjects, however, declined to participate.

For purposes of analysis, sexual abuse was defined as any reports of sexual contact at or before age 16 with someone 5 or more years older. Characteristics of the abuse assessed in this study were age of the victim at his or her first abuse experience, duration of the abuse (the amount of time between the subject's first and last abuse incident), whether any instances had involved incest, presence of physical force on one or more occasions, and whether intercourse had ever occurred.

Subjects were asked to indicate the extent to which they had fantasized about six different sexual scenarios over the preceding 12 months: (a) "You and someone having mutually consenting intercourse," (b) "You forcing someone to have intercourse with you," (c) "You being dominated to the point of being physically forced to have intercourse with someone else," (d) "You participating in an orgy," (e) "You having sex with a stranger," and (f) "You having sex with a child." The frequency of each fantasy was rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from "never" to "often."

RESULTS

As indicated in Table 1, fantasies of mutually consenting sex were common in this sample (86.4% of all subjects). Least likely of all fantasies was that of sex with a child, reported by only 4% of subjects.

Of the 339 subjects surveyed, 318 (106 males and 212 females) completed all questionnaire items relevant to the present study. A childhood history of sexual abuse was reported by 67 (21.1%) of these subjects, with males and females having relatively equivalent incidence rates (males: $n = 21$, 19.8%; females: $n = 46$, 21.7%). Within the sexually abused subsample, mean age at first victimization was 11.1 years. The mean duration of abuse was 3.5 years, ranging from one incident to 12 years. Oral, anal, or vaginal intercourse occurred at least once for 53.5% of this group, and 31% of subjects had been physically forced into sexual contact on at least one occasion. Sexual abuse by a parent or stepparent was infrequent, occurring for only 2 subjects (2.8% of the subsample).

Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed significant differences in self-reported sexual fantasies according to subject sex ($F(6,309) = 4.26$, $p < .0004$), history of sexual abuse ($F(6,309) = 2.35$, $p < .031$), and the interaction of subject sex and sexual abuse history ($F(6,309) = 2.62$, $p < .017$). Post-hoc univariate F tests indicated that males had more fanta-

Table 2. Fantasy Scores According to Gender and Sexual Abuse History

Fantasy	Males				Females			
	Not Abused		Abused		Not Abused		Abused	
	\bar{X}	<i>SD</i>	\bar{X}	<i>SD</i>	\bar{X}	<i>SD</i>	\bar{X}	<i>SD</i>
Consenting	3.44	1.32	3.52	1.17	3.15	1.39	3.65	1.23
Forcing	1.45	0.82	1.71	1.15	1.21	0.61	1.48	0.94
Being forced	1.45	0.88	1.24	0.44	1.41	0.80	2.04	1.37
Orgy	1.71	1.05	1.71	0.90	1.37	0.87	1.85	1.21
Sex with a stranger	2.24	1.23	2.62	1.24	1.76	1.19	2.11	1.34
Sex with a child	1.05	0.21	1.05	0.22	1.05	0.37	1.07	0.25

sies of forcing someone to have intercourse with them ($F(1,314) = 8.74, p < .003$), participating in an orgy ($F(1,314) = 4.14, p < .043$), and having sex with a stranger ($F(1,314) = 10.65, p < .001$) (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations). Analysis of the sexual abuse effect revealed that subjects with histories of childhood sexual victimization reported more sexual fantasies than did their nonabused peers in all areas but sex with a child, that is, of consenting intercourse ($F(1,314) = 4.15, p < .042$), forcing someone to have intercourse ($F(1,314) = 6.65, p < .010$), being physically forced to have intercourse with someone else ($F(1,314) = 8.56, p < .004$), participating in an orgy ($F(1,314) = 6.06, p < .014$), and having sex with a stranger ($F(1,314) = 4.56, p < .033$). Post-hoc tests of the interaction between sex and sexual abuse indicated a single significant variable: Sexually abused women reported more sexual fantasies of being physically forced than did women without sexual abuse histories or men regardless of molestation history ($F(1,314) = 8.15, p < .0018$) (see Figure 1).

As indicated in Table 3, when correlation coefficients were calculated between sexual abuse characteristics and those fantasies found to be significantly higher for abused subjects, several relationships emerged. Earlier onset of abuse was associated with fantasies of being forced into sex, whereas abuse that continued over longer periods of time was related to fantasies of participating in an orgy and sex with a stranger.

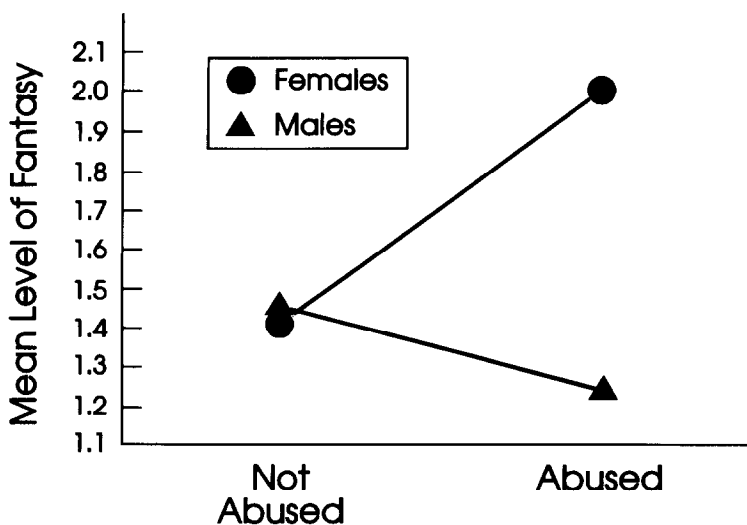


Figure 1. Fantasy of being forced into sex as a function of gender and abuse status.

Table 3. Correlations Between Fantasy Type and Sexual Abuse Characteristics

Fantasy Type	Age at Onset	Duration	Intercourse	Force	Parental Incest
Consenting	-.06	.06	.10	.12	-.08
Forcing	-.10	.01	-.05	.07	.13
Being forced	-.26	.18	-.14	.05	.10
Orgy	-.21	.40	-.07	-.15	-.05
Stranger	-.02	.33	.07	-.05	.04

Note. Correlations italicized if $p \leq .015$ (minimum alpha to maintain a total experiment-wise error rate of less than .5).

Given the specific tendency for sexually abused women to have more fantasies of forced sex than sexually abused men, separate Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated between molestation characteristics and this fantasy for each sex. For female subjects, the fantasy of being forced into sex was associated with earlier onset of molestation ($r = -.31, p < .007$). There were no significant correlations, however, between abuse characteristics and fantasies of being forced into sex for sexually abused males.

DISCUSSION

As anticipated, males in this study had more sexual fantasies than did females in several areas: forcing someone to have sexual intercourse, involvement in orgies, and sex with a stranger. These data are in agreement with a number of other studies highlighting men's greater frequency of sexual fantasies relative to women (Hessellund, 1976; Kinsey et al., 1953; Wilson & Lang, 1981), and their tendency to involve "more sexual acts and parts" and less emotional connection (Ellis & Symons, 1990; Gold & Chick, 1988). These data are also in agreement with other studies that specifically document males' tendency to fantasize about raping or coercing sexual contact (Arndt et al., 1985; Knafo & Jaffe, 1984). Taken together, such findings support the possibility that sexual fantasies may, to some extent, mirror male and female sex role expectations in our culture (Barclay, 1973; Hessellund, 1976; Knafo & Jaffe, 1984; Mednick, 1977; Sue, 1979).

Sexual abuse survivors in the present study reported more sexual fantasies, in a variety of areas, than did their nonabused peers. Regardless of gender, subjects molested as children had more frequent fantasies of consenting intercourse, forcing someone into intercourse, being forced into intercourse, involvement in an orgy, and sex with a stranger. The latter two of these fantasies were correlated with total duration of sexual abuse history. As suggested earlier, this increased tendency toward sexual fantasy may reflect what Finkelhor and Browne (1985) refer to as traumatic sexualization—"... a process in which a child's sexuality (including both sexual feelings and sexual attitudes) is shaped into a developmentally inappropriate and interpersonally dysfunctional fashion as a result of sexual abuse" (p. 531). Traumatic sexualization has been linked by Finkelhor and others to the various adult sexual problems associated with a sexual abuse history, including sexual preoccupation and dysfunctional or excessive sexual behavior (e.g., Briere & Runtz, 1990a; Briere & Zaidi, 1989; Herman, 1981; Maltz & Holman, 1987). In the context of heightened sexual thoughts and behavior, sexual fantasy might be expected to occur quite frequently. Whether such fantasies motivate or covary with sexual preoccupation and more frequent sexual behavior, however, cannot be determined from the present data.

In addition to the general relationship between abuse history and later sexual fantasies, female abuse survivors were especially likely to have fantasies of being forced into intercourse.

This relationship was greatest for women whose sexual abuse occurred earlier in childhood. The correlation between fantasies of being forced and sexual abuse history may arise from conditioned associations between domination and sexual stimuli. The child whose victimization contained both aggressive and sexual components may ultimately associate one with the other, such that sexual feelings and fantasies inherently include themes of violation or of being controlled. The present data suggest that such conditioning may be most powerful when it occurs especially early in life. It should be noted that this perspective does not suggest that former abuse victims desire or seek sexual aggression, only that such associations might logically occur during the process of sexual fantasy.

The connection between sex and submission may be exacerbated for women, who are typically socialized to value strength and dominance in their sexual partners and encouraged to see sexual acquiescence as a normative feminine response. Russell (1980) notes, in this regard, that "rape and other masochistic female fantasies are a reflection of women's powerless role in society, the intense socialization they receive to accept that role, and their sexual repression" (p. 229). Similarly, research by Corne, Briere, and Esses (1992) found that childhood socialization that included exposure to pornography increased women's subsequent rape-supportive attitudes and their reports of sexual fantasies involving being forced into sex.

Interestingly, nonabused males and females did not differ in the extent of their fantasies about being forced into intercourse, nor was there a sex difference in this fantasy across abuse status. This suggests that, at least for the current sample, the notion that women are generally more prone than men to "rape fantasies" is not supported. Instead, it appears that: (a) both males and females occasionally have such fantasies (28.4% of subjects in the present study), and (b) that at least some women who report elevated rates of such fantasies may do so as a result of childhood sexual abuse experiences.

In conclusion, the present study suggests that both extent and type of sexual fantasies may be influenced by the fantasizer's gender and his or her childhood history of sexual abuse. It is likely that, were other subject characteristics and childhood traumas studied here as well, they also might have predicted sexual fantasy production. To the extent that these results are generalizable, examination of an individual's fantasy life may provide important insights into his or her current psychological state and early childhood history.

Of equal importance are the specific findings regarding childhood sexual abuse. These new data support clinical impressions that individuals who were molested as children often have fantasies that include sexually abusive elements, and that these elements may be especially prominent in abused women's fantasies. The perspective offered in this paper is that such themes may reflect, in some instances, the impacts of early victimization experiences on subsequent imaginal processes, filtered through social prescriptions regarding female-appropriate sexual behavior. Further research is clearly indicated in this area, not only to broaden our understanding of sexual fantasy, but also in terms of the potential implications of such research for clinical work with molestation survivors.

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Résumé—Dans cette étude, on a enquêté auprès de 314 étudiants universitaires (107 hommes et 207 femmes) en leur administrant un questionnaire portant sur les abus sexuels qu'ils auraient subi en enfance et sur la nature et l'étendue de leurs fantasmes sexuels en âge adulte. Une analyse des variables du sexe, des antécédents, puis de l'interaction entre ces deux variables a apporté les constats suivants: les hommes rapportaient un plus grand nombre de fantasmes dans lesquels il forçaient leur partenaire dans des relations sexuelles, participaient à des orgies ou avaient des relations avec un étranger. Les étudiants qui avaient été abusés en enfance rapportaient des fantasmes plus fréquemment que le groupe non abusé et ceci dans 4 ou 5 catégories d'activités. Enfin, les femmes ayant été abusées en enfance rapportaient plus souvent des fantasmes dans lesquels elles se voyaient forcées de participer à des activités sexuelles, comparées aux femmes sans antécédents ou comparées aux hommes avec ou sans antécédents. Dans plusieurs des cas, il y avait une corrélation assez remarquable entre les abus en jeune âge, la longue durée de ces abus et les fantasmes.

Resumen—Un total de 314 estudiantes universitarios (107 varones y 207 hembras) llenaron un cuestionario que examinaba reportes de historias de abuso sexual en la infancia y el tipo y la importancia de las fantasías sexuales adultas. Se encontraron efectos multivariados en relación al sexo y la historia de abuso, así como una interacción multivariada entre estas variables. Los varones tuvieron más fantasías en las que forzaban a alguien a sostener relaciones sexuales con ellos, participaban en una orgía y tenían relaciones sexuales con extraños. Los sujetos con historia de abuso sexual tenían más fantasías sexuales que sus compañeros que no habían sido abusados en cuatro de las cinco categorías. Finalmente, las mujeres sexualmente abusadas reportaron más fantasías de haber sido forzadas sexualmente que las mujeres sin historias de abuso sexual o los hombres, sin importar que tuvieran o no historia de haber sido molestados sexualmente. En varias oportunidades, las fantasías correlacionaron con el abuso, especialmente con el abuso temprano y extendido.