

Revisiting the Concept of Sexual Fantasies: A Narrative Review

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ABSTRACT

Background: A sexual fantasy is a mental thought process which blends with individual's sexuality and causes sexual excitement. This characteristic connects sexual fantasy more with the sexual and reproductive health of a person. There are differences in the nature and frequency of sexual fantasy experienced by both males and females which are greatly influenced by gender roles and societal forces.

Method: A literature review is done using databases "Google Scholar, PubMed, and Medline". A thorough analysis of the literature was done to extract the most relevant information.

Results: The sexual fantasies are divided as typical and atypical. In typical sexual fantasy, all normal imaginations are included such as dominance-submissiveness, watching pornography, oral and anal sex, and bondage. On the other hand, atypical sexual fantasies include deviant imaginations like paraphilia.

Conclusion: While sexual fantasies are of variant types, it was found that these are more commonly reported in Western countries than in the Eastern countries; therefore, there is a growing need to conduct more studies in Eastern countries to better conclude the findings.

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Introduction

A sexual fantasy, sometimes referred as "erotic fantasy or sensual dream" is a mental pattern or image which blends an individual's sexuality and can make or upgrade sexual excitement, and is considered as one of the component of sexual and reproductive health [1]. Sexual and reproductive health (SRH) is defined as a state of physical, social and emotional well-being for having a safe and satisfying sex, and ability to reproduce based on their own choices [2]. The feeling of getting pleasure as a part of sexual life connects sexual fantasy more with the SRH. A sensual dream can be made by the individual's creative mind or memory and might be activated self-rulingly or by outer incitement, for example, sensual writing or sex entertainment, or sexual fascination in someone else. The nature of sensual dream is to excite you, and make you think about situations that happen rarely, if by any means, and digging more of your sexual desires.

Sexuality is often associated with pleasure and procreation; however, one should know that it is a whole spectrum of thoughts, behaviors, acts, attraction and fantasies which are way beyond the procreation [3]. Researches are deemed to find out the differences in personality traits amongst men and women with specific themes related to sexual fantasies. Sexual fantasies have a positive association with self-esteem and security, and a negative association with anxiety [4]. Sex blame (sexual guilt), which is likewise more present in females as compared to males, is one factor that has been seen as a significant modulator of the amount,

humiliation, striking quality, expressiveness, and assortment of detailed sexual dreams, also as time and ethics, which will in general impact the ability to report sexual dreams [4].

The identification and frequency of experiencing sexual fantasies in asexual individuals is another side of the story. In a study finding association between asexuality, masturbation and sexual fantasies resulted that, around 40% out of 534 asexual individuals reported of never having a sexual fantasy at all while nearly 10% of them had a sexual fantasy without involving other people, and all of them were least likely did masturbation in the past few months [5]. If we consider heterosexual individuals, the important predictor for their sexual attitudes, behaviors and erotic relationship is been shaped by "gender roles" [4]. While there are growing debates on "sex" serving more towards gender roles than "culture", these are the biased attributes for the schemas that are built in early childhood through a mechanism of "social rewards and punishments" [4].

Back in 1950s, sexual fantasies were considered as a negative idea as one think that sexual fantasies depicts that there are lacking in the relationship which is making you have sensual dreams especially among women [6]. However, not all sexual fantasies are bad; they can be divided into two types as typical (normal) and atypical (deviant) which is further discussed below [7]. Sexual fantasies are an important area of sexual and reproductive health because these also contributes toward intimacy, arousal and making

connections. Also, the scope of sexual fantasies started before, but this area still needs more attention because it contributes more towards the psychology of the person than the actions itself [8].

Methodology

A basic literature review was done using databases “Google Scholar, PubMed, and Medline”. The words used for searching were “sexual and reproductive health”, “sexual fantasies”, “typical sexual fantasies”, “deviant sexual fantasies”, and “paraphilia”. A thorough analysis of the literature was done to extract the most relevant information.

Results

Many studies were identified relating to the typical and atypical sexual fantasies. The things which were included in the normal typical sexual fantasies included: the concept of dominance-submissiveness, oral-genital stimulation, anal-genital stimulation, watching pornography, and bondage. On the contrary, paraphilic behaviors were considered as a deviant sexual fantasy which included 8 subtypes; Voyeurism, Exhibitionism, Frotteurism, Sadism, Masochism, Fetishism, Pedophilia, and Transvestism [9].

Table 1: Types of Sexual Fantasies

Typical sexual fantasies	Atypical sexual fantasies
Dominance-submissiveness, oral-genital stimulation, anal sex, watching pornography, bondage (BDSM)	Paraphilia: Voyeurism, Exhibitionism, Frotteurism, Sadism, Masochism, Fetishism, Pedophilia, and Transvestism

Upon doing the literature search, it was found out that majority of the studies conducted were based on U.S population, and western population, but lack studies which includes the countries in the eastern world. A review study was conducted to see the rates of engagement of pornography in adolescence in the last 20 years (2016) where they stated that they identified majority of the studies from North America, Europe, and Australia, got nearly 5 studies relating to African countries, but did not find any data or research for Asian countries, Russia, Central and South America, and Middle eastern countries [10]. Another study was conducted as a mixed method approach to identify the BDSM fluidity. Out of nearly 200 participants, there wasn't a single participant from the eastern countries which clearly shows that data is very limited for eastern countries [11].

This clearly reflects that sexual fantasies are greatly influenced by the culture in which we live. Fantasies are very closely associated with the societal expectations which are attached with genders and taboos associated with certain sexual activities [12]. For example, in a society like Pakistan where patriarchy is the dominant one, the fantasies which are not compatible with the norms associated with this culture and refrained. Thus, culture shapes our information related to sex, and desires according to the norms [13]. However, media is now extending its roots to every part of the world, and so people get influenced by them by just sitting at their home [13]. A study was found where the authors studied the sexual arousal and fantasy in males and females from U.S and Macau. The males from the U.S reported sexual arousal earlier in their lives than males from Macau and similar thing was found out for females [14]. It was concluded that gender influence and cultural perspectives deeply contributes towards sexual arousal and fantasy.

Discussion

Empirical studies have identified the difference in both the frequency and the sexual content in males and females. Men are more likely to get more sexual encounters than women, and they

get aroused by the physical stimuli around them. Women on the other hand does not get aroused by physical stimuli until and unless there is an element of emotionality attached to it [15]. It appears to be practically redundant to express that sexual want and sexual joy are of focal significance to sexuality. To be certainly, there are different inspirations for taking part in sexual conduct other than the quest for physical joy, and neither desire nor joy are vital for sexual acts to happen. But one must make sure that in any case, the longing for pleasurable physical sensation is obviously a significant motive. This is particularly evident when one thinks about sexual dreams, which are private mental occasions whose sole reason would appear to be to instigate pleasurable sentiments of sexual want and excitement [16].

Sexual Response Cycle

Sexual response cycle is divided into 4 phases: excitement, plateau, orgasm, and resolution. In excitement phase, your body starts to prepare yourself for the sexual activity, and so the muscles start to get tensed, the heart rate increases alongside the blood pressure and your body starts mounting genital excitatory physiologic response (vaginal lubrication, clitoris stimulation, testicular swelling etc.). Then comes the plateau phase, in which your body responses are on their peak and you continue to feel physiologic responses like increased breathing, more muscle tensing, more swelled penis, and retraction of clitoris. In the orgasm phase, the neuromuscular tension built up and the fluids start to release in both male and female (semen, and vaginal secretion with contractions). In resolution phase, the body starts coming back to its resting normal stage which may take several hours. Sexual response cycle is of great importance when we talk about sexual fantasy. Sexual fantasy gives you a sense of pleasure through imagination. This arouses the sexual want and we begin to experience the very first phase of the sexual response cycle which is the “excitement phase”. The myths and issues regarding knowledge of sexual fantasies brings a huge connection with the natural sexual response. This brings situations where people believe or tend to have a concept of acceptance from every individual about every kind of fantasy they can perform, sustain or provide consent for. Thus, this creates issues in sexual satisfaction, relationships, health and increases stress among individuals.

Differences in Sexual Fantasies

Sexual fantasies could be narrowed down to different subject lines, the first one of which is power [16]. When we talk about power in sensual dreams, we are more inclined towards the concepts of dominance and submission. Males are usually the one who like to be dominated and expects women to completely surrender in front of them. Likewise women also like to be submissive and allows their partners to completely dominate the play [6]. This is because of societal portrayal of both the sexes where women are considered passive and should comply with whatever sexual initiation a man does. Also, sexual excitement by predominance and submissiveness is a sign of mating procedure in light of the fact that such a conduct brings about an expanded reproductive achievement and consequently may prompt the special choice of people who lean toward sexual excitement by various leveled difference [17]. Another fantasy which is very commonly seen is the “oral-genital stimulation” commonly referred to as oral sex. This is experienced by both the genders and have two directions: male to female which includes licking and stimulating female genitals orally, and female to male which includes the excitation and erection of penis through oral mean [18]. A study was conducted in West which revealed that 85.4% of men and 83.2% of women had performed oral sex in their life [19]. This clearly portrays how this fantasy has gained a form of reality. The similar

concept is seen when it comes to anal sex. The frequency of anal sex has increased drastically from 1993 to 2008, and this because of the frequent depictions of doing non-vaginal sex (oral and anal sex) in the pornography show business preferably without the use of condoms which is the focal influencer in the increased frequency of anal sex amongst many people [20]. A U.S based study concluded that approximately 35% of women and up to 45% of men have had anal intercourse in their life [9].

Pornography is the major contributor of sexual dreams and fantasies. The statistics of pornography are indeed shocking: around 35% of the internet downloads are related to porn, up to 35% have encountered pornographic content through ads and pop-up (unwanted exposure), and nearly 28,000 people are watching porn every second [21]. Pornography has brought about sexual media progressively filling in as a wellspring of developmental improvement of sexual contents—because of both inescapability and early access. As early time of presentation to sexual media becomes noticeable, an ever increasing number of youngster’s get their developmental introduction to sexuality from sexual media [22]. As a result, both the genders make up their own fantasies related to sexual acts which sometimes is a bit problematic; for example, male start thinking of an ideal body shape with huge sex organs in their partners which sometimes is not practical and leads to dissatisfaction amongst both [23]. Another U.S based study concluded that out of 83% women who watch porn, half of them actually uses this for masturbation; increased rates for masturbation amongst sexually active women were associated with mental arousal and imagination for pornographic script and images while having sex with their partners [24].

Bondage is another dimension of sensual dreams and fantasies. This is common in both the genders; however, males tend to turn their fantasies into reality more as compared to females [25]. The concept of bondage comes under BDSM (“bondage-discipline, dominance submission, sadism-masochism) in which the fantasy rolls around humiliation, physical restriction (probably by hand cuffing your partner), control and role-playing [25]. A Belgian population based study revealed that nearly 45% of the total sample have performed at least one activity related to BDSM, and additional 22% have had fantasies about doing it [26]. The idea gained its popularity from a movie named “fifty shades of grey” which religiously promoted the concept of bondage and dominance-submission relationship between man and woman accompanied by “pain with pleasure” [26]. BDSM practitioners are often stigmatized for their behavior and fantasies, and the fact that it was previously included in the DSM-V list of sexual deviant behaviors fueled the societal unacceptability [26]. However, things are now streamlined for removing BDSM from the mental disorder list because of lack of objective data and societal acceptance.

What if I say that people also fantasize of having group sex? Well! This is also one of the very common sensual dreams that the people want. A U.S based study revealed that approximately 27% of the population reported having group sex every year, and out of these, nearly 35% used condoms with their sex partners [27]. People want to turn this fantasy into reality as at the point when you have different accomplices who are groveling over you like this, this is probably going to cause you to feel appealing and wanted. It’s not simply that; at the point when you’re ready to please or explicitly fulfill different individuals without a moment’s delay, this is probably going to cause you to feel approved regarding your sexual aptitudes and capacities, as well [28]. Interestingly, cis-gender heterosexual people also have this of sexual fantasy

towards same sex. There is a huge debate about sexual orientation in these situations, but it is also believed that it is a dynamic phenomenon which may change over time. Also, the fact that it is a fantasy, the thoughts of having intimacy with same sex itself arouses you, and you don’t necessarily perform it [4]. This fantasy is more common amongst females than in males. Adventures are another aspect of your sexual fantasy. What do you mean by that? It basically justifies the dreams of doing sex on unusual public locations like beach, or any other place which seems romantic to you, and even trying new positions. However, one should be careful not to mix this up with paraphilic behaviors and fantasies.

Deviant Sexual Fantasies

Deviant sexual fantasies are another important topic, which is considered as a significant contributor towards “sex offending behaviors” [29]. Renaud et al., announced that degenerate sexual excitement is owing to hypo-arousal of transient structures of the cerebrum associated with the restraint of sexual excitement as well as to enactment of the orbitofrontal region, and estimate that deviant sexual arousal may result from a non-functional territories of the mind to perceive the body shape [30]. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental disorders defines paraphilia as an unusual sexual fantasy [31]. Paraphilia is a big umbrella which contains 8 further categories: Voyeurism, Exhibitionism, Frotteurism, Sadism, Masochism, Fetishism, Pedophilia, and Transvestism [32].

1. Voyeurism, which includes sexual excitement from watching an individual (stranger) who is uncovering or taking part in sexual action
2. Exhibitionism, which includes presenting or exposing one’s private parts to an individual (stranger)
3. Frotteurism, which depicts sexual excitement that arises from contacting/rubbing or scouring against an individual (stranger)
4. Sadism, which depicts sexual gratification through humiliation, suffering and pain
5. Fetishism, which depicts sexual gratification from atypical objects e.g. shoes
6. Masochism, which depicts sexual gratification from one’s own humiliation and pain
7. Pedophilia, which portrays excitement because of sexual dreams about kids or sexual practices including kids
8. Transvestism, depicts sexual arousal by “cross-dressing” like the opposite gender

Voyeurism, Exhibitionism, Frotteurism and Pedophilia are those four forms of paraphilia are more dangerous, and pedophilic even have some legal obligations because this might lead to child sex [32]. Furthermore, some sort of variation in sexual action is normal in grown-up sexual connections and fantasies. At the point when individuals commonly consent to take part in them, uncommon sexual practices that cause no mischief might be a piece of a cherishing and caring relationship. But when these sexual practices cause trouble or hurt or meddle with an individual’s capacity to work in their daily activities, they are viewed as a paraphilic issue. The misery may result from others’ responses or from the individual’s blame about accomplishing something socially unsuitable [9].

One point is very worth noting to that not all sex offenders have a paraphilic disorder and not all paraphilic individuals are sex offenders [33]. A study concluded that there are over 5-30% of the people in the general population who are involved in some

paraphilic identified behaviors, but not all sexual offenders are diagnosed to have paraphilia [34]. Paraphilic individuals tend to kill their victim from their sexual assault which is more common in "sadism" [34]. A study was conducted in Canada in which 170 sexually offending men were recruited and divided into two categories: non-homicidal sexual offenders (NHSOs) and homicidal sexual offenders (HSOs); the HSOs chooses the victim of their own choice, humiliate the victim, and mutilate them if they resist, whereas NHSOs chooses victim with certain characteristics [34]. Also, NHSOs tend to injure the victim from any sort of murder, whereas HSOs tend to murder the victim.

Paraphilic individuals get their sexual preference from an experience in the past with deviant stimulus and aroused mental and psychological state [35]. This stimulus could be at a particular time and place where intercourse or masturbation took place or it could be a sexual fantasy. In this way, paraphilia's can emerge as an instance of one-preliminary unplanned gaining from a deviant sexual experience.

Our sexual fantasies could be therapeutic in many ways. They not only give us a sense of pleasure, but also helps us to bypass our psychological needs at a given time. It is important to note that our psychological needs are not static and changes over time, our fantasies try to adjust with our mental needs. Therefore, the things which turns you on now might not sounds appealing to you suppose a year back, and it is completely fine. Specialists regularly use dream preparing in the treatment of couples with sexual dysfunctions, guaranteeing that dreams can advance couple closeness and improve sexual working. All the more explicitly, they contend that sexual creative mind offers mental options in contrast to current distress that encourages arranging of a positive future game-plan [8]. However, there is always another side of the story. Sexual fantasies bring equal proportion of pleasure and misery. It becomes a misery if people have deviant sexual fantasies e.g. in paraphilia. It not only lead to societal unacceptable behaviors, it also diverts people way to commit crimes [36].

Conclusion

In conclusion, sexual fantasies are the sexual excitement from one's imagination ultimately leading to a sense of pleasure. There are some typical and atypical fantasies both of which has their own concepts. It is important to note that sexual fantasies are a main contributor for the sexual response cycle which excites the person and originate the sexual desire. While sexual fantasies are of variant types, it was found that these are more commonly reported in Western countries than in the Eastern countries; therefore, there is a growing need to conduct more studies in Eastern countries to better conclude the findings.

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