



GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SEXUAL FANTASY: AN EVOLUTIONARY ANALYSIS

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Summary—The sociobiological analysis of male and female mating strategies leads to the prediction that men would be more inclined to fantasize sex with anonymous and multiple partners than women, whose fantasies would suggest a desire for close-bonded and famous partners. These expectations were confirmed with reference to a nationwide quota poll of 788 British people, representative of four age groups. The most striking difference appeared in the 'group sex' item (a male/female ratio of 4.2). As a proportion of total fantasy output, women were more likely than men to fantasize same-sex and famous partners. There were indications of a convergence of male and female fantasies towards middle-age, which might be interpreted as resulting from a liberation from the effects of testosterone and oestrogen respectively. Copyright © 1997 Elsevier Science Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

Sexual fantasies provide an interesting window to the evolutionary instincts underlying sexual behaviour because they are less subject to constraints of civilization, morality and social convention than sexual behaviour itself. In fantasy, people are relatively free to indulge their primitive lusts and brutish impulses in ways that might be unacceptable in reality. Fantasies can also be employed selfishly, without regard for the preferences and sensitivities of one's partner, hence they are better placed to reveal the differing biological natures of men and women than either sexual behaviour or public statements of opinion (Wilson, 1981).

At the root of the differences between typical men and women is the gap in the premium value of sperm versus egg (Symons, 1979). Males produce copious, expendable sperm cells and have the capacity to impregnate many females in parallel, whereas eggs are precious to females because they are few and far between and multiple matings confer less reproductive advantage. This fundamental difference between men and women leads to the clear prediction that men will be attracted to the idea of partner novelty and multiple matings whereas women will be more concerned with the quality of their partner (e.g. his social status, earning power, faithfulness and willingness to share resources). Indeed, the typical pattern in the mammalian world (albeit with a few monogamous exceptions) is for a sexual dimorphism whereby testosterone results in the males being larger and more competitive/aggressive with each other than the females, who generally prefer to mate with males at the top of the hierarchy. These strategies have clear adaptive significance in that the male who controls a harem of females is able to pass his genes on to a greater number of offspring, while the female who secures the attention of a dominant male has better protection and provision for her (necessarily limited) offspring.

Translated to sexual fantasies, these differing mating strategies should mean that men would be more disposed towards group sex scenarios with multiple, anonymous partners whereas women would incline towards thoughts of sexual encounters with identifiable, famous (i.e. socially powerful) men. Other types of fantasy (e.g. same-sex partners, or strangers) are less easy to predict on the basis of evolutionary theory. There have been some studies that appear to support these predictions. Wilson (1987) found that men were about twice as likely as women to report fantasies of (or enjoyment of) group sex, while women were more likely to fantasize about sex with their steady partner within a romantic/exotic setting. Fantasies concerning sex with celebrities were not investigated in this study, but the idea of being 'taken' by a powerful and forceful partner was more typically female than male. Ellis and Symons (1990) found that men were more inclined to fantasize visual images, including the physical characteristics of the partner, whereas women's fantasies more

often featured touch and the personal and emotional characteristics of the partner. Men were more likely to have had fantasized sex with over 1000 different partners (32% as against 8% of women), and women were more likely to regard their fantasized partner as unique (75% as against 38%). Barclay (1973) also observed the visual/fetishistic tendency of males as against the common themes of being emotionally involved and dominated in women.

These studies may be criticized on the grounds of using social science students or otherwise unrepresentative samples and none of them included 'famous partners' as a fantasy option. Based on sociobiological theory, this study predicts that men will fantasize more about group sex than famous partners, whereas with women it will be the other way about. It might also be predicted that the differences between men and women will diminish with age as each gender becomes liberated from their sex hormones (the declining testosterone in men perhaps producing the more striking change).

METHOD

The ideal opportunity to investigate these questions arose when the author was asked to advise on a major survey of sexual attitudes and behaviour being conducted by a reputable polling organization (ICM) on behalf of a British national newspaper (*The Daily Mirror*). A quota sample of 788 people aged 17-57 was obtained in 11 randomly selected city centre locations around Britain in early February 1995. Informants completed anonymous questionnaires in private conditions. Analysis was based on splitting respondents by gender and four age groups (17-27, 28-37, 38-47 and 48-57), approximately 100 respondents falling into each age x group.

Key questions for purposes of this study were those that asked people whether or not they fantasized about: "Sex with more than one partner at the same time" (group sex) and "a famous person". Two 'control' items were included: "I would like to make love to a complete stranger" (strangers) and "sometimes when I think of members of the same sex it turns me on" (homosexuality).

RESULTS

Results are shown in Fig. 1, which depicts the percentages of men and women reporting fantasies in each of the four categories in relation to increasing age. Each point on the graph is based on the responses of around 100 Ss, so the patterns that emerge may be regarded as fairly stable.

Men are strikingly more fond of group sex than women, by a factor of 4.2 (42% men and 10% women). In fact, of the four analysed categories, group sex was first favourite for men and last for women. Although the difference between men and women for the 'famous person' category was small, more women than men endorsed it (17% against 16%). Homosexual fantasies were also slightly more prevalent in women (12% versus 10%) whilst sex with strangers was somewhat more common as a fantasy in men (33% vs 25%).

Another clear sex difference to emerge from this data which is not shown in Fig. 1 was the

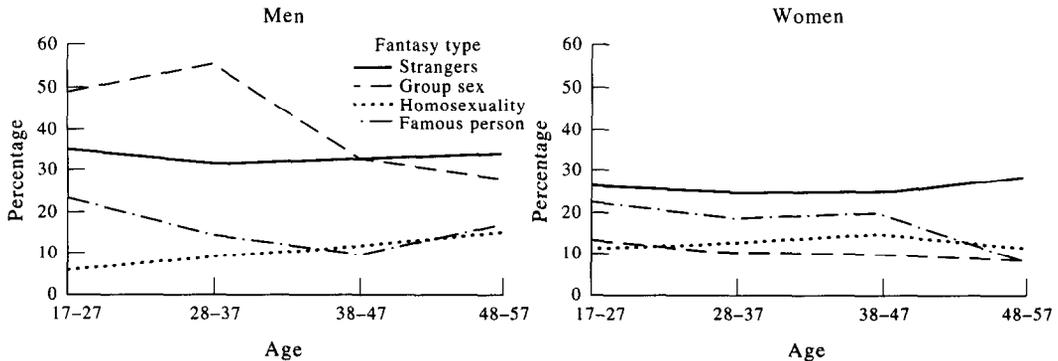


Fig. 1. Percentages of men and women in four age groups who report experiencing various types of sexual fantasy.

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