

The Secret Logic of Sexual Fantasies

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Sexual fantasies often seem strange. When an ordinary person hears about or sees one – say in a movie, or book, or popular culture outlet—that person can be quite befuddled. How can a man get off masturbating in front of a woman? What’s going on with people who like bondage—you know, handcuffs and whips? How exactly do “glory holes” work? Why the hell are some people sexually attracted to children? What’s this stuff about Trump getting off watching women pee in a hotel in Russia?

When most of us encounter stories like this, scenes like this, if we’re not repelled, then we’re driven to laugh. It all seems so deviant, perverse, and crazy.

Well, it turns out—not so much! It turns out that sexual fantasies have what I call a “secret logic.”

First, let’s get clear on what constitutes a sexual fantasy. The ordinary understanding, after all, is that it’s like an erotic daydream. A person imagines something that gets him or her excited.—There’s almost a sort of plot, some contrived scenario, and it’s arousing.

And while that’s true—that IS a sexual fantasy—it’s too narrow a definition. And, so it’s likely, that was the definition, that some people would then say, “I guess that I don’t have sexual fantasies because I don’t have such daydreams.” And I think that’s wrong...

But what if we define sexual fantasy slightly differently? What if we say that whatever it is that turns you on is a sexual fantasy? And by “whatever” I mean things like the type of body that you find most sexually attractive, the type of personality type that you find most exciting- or are most drawn to—or the sorts of things you like to do during sex that are most stimulating. If you use pornography, what are the depictions, the scenarios that you gravitate toward? What if—in other words, we say that whatever it is that you find especially arousing is a sexual fantasy? Then, I would argue, it’d be fair to say that we ALL have sexual fantasies. And each person’s fantasies are likely to be slightly different—almost like a fingerprint.

Now, I know that cultural ideas of beauty, and of what is supposed to be sexy obviously play a role in what turns us on. But it’s also true that each unique individual person usually has his or her own unique spin, adds his or her own particular twist, has his or her own private preference when it comes to what is most arousing and attractive. No two are exactly alike.

So— how do these things actually work? What do they mean? How can one person like *this* type of partner or this particular type of lovemaking choreography and not another?

So what is the secret logic of sexual fantasies?

Well, here’s what’s at the heart of the matter.

People—each and every one of us—get sexually excited if and only if it is safe to do so. Safety is the key. We get aroused if it’s safe. And sexual preferences and fantasies are constructed—usually unconsciously –to do just that—to make it safe to get aroused.

But if fantasies make sexual excitement safe to experience, then what's the danger are they overcoming? What's so dangerous or risky about feeling desire to begin with—such that we need fantasies to help us out?

What's the danger exactly?

Well, guilt is a big one. Guilt makes sexual excitement uncomfortable and even risky to experience. And I'm not just talking about repressive Puritanical guilt about pleasure and sex that we all know about—and that many of us grew up with. Guilt comes into play in a much more quiet and intimate way. Most importantly, people regularly feel guilty about somehow hurting others with their sexual desire and excitement. I see this every day in my clinical practice, although people don't call it guilt. Still, it's very common for someone to worry—on a visceral instinctual level—that expressing the full measure of his or her sexual needs and feelings will potentially harm a partner, or drive away an object of sexual desire if you will. If one worries about harming others with one's sexual energy, then that sexual energy needs to be repressed or be somehow hidden away.

There are lots of forms such worry can take. One patient of mine, a woman, came to believe that men were basically fragile and had insecure egos and that if she really, as she put it, “let it all hang out” in bed, her partner would be overwhelmed and anxious about not measuring up. And, as a result, she would feel painfully guilty. A male patient of mine believed that women were the ones who were insecure and that if he objectified his girlfriends in any way, even a little, they would invariably feel used and exploited and he'd feel terribly guilty.

Some people worry that others will feel drained, or subordinated, or otherwise feel bad in the bedroom. And all of these guilty beliefs lead people to hold themselves back sexually, leads them to inhibit their excitement.

The imagined guilty prospect of hurting someone you care about with your sexual desires is the type of danger that sexual fantasies are intended to alleviate. Because if a sexual fantasy could somehow help one overcome these feelings of guilt, they would therefore make it safe enough for excitement to come out of hiding and a full experience of pleasure would then be possible.

It turns out that this is exactly what happens in sexual fantasies or scenarios involving domination. Many people like scenarios in which they are dominated. They like depictions of dominance and submission and they like to enact such depictions in some form in the bedroom—could be very mild, like “who's on top” or extreme forms of S & M. Now-note: This doesn't mean that they want or like being submissive or subordinate in everyday life, in their everyday relationships. No—my point is that they like elements of submission in the bedroom. This might happen in a sexual fantasy of being “taken” or “controlled” or thrown on the bed and ravished, otherwise being compelled somehow to submit to the desire and power of a partner. And such fantasies and enactments can and do happen in gay and straight couples all the time.

So, how does it create safety? Well, here's the secret unconscious logic. If the other person—one's partner in this case— plays the role of the person who is strong and

in charge and selfish, then the person being dominated doesn't have to worry about hurting that person, or hurting anyone. The person "on the bottom" of this sexual power dynamic can, in some sense, just "let the cat out of the bag" sexually because it's safe to do so - safety in this context meaning not having to worry or feel guilty about the well-being of a partner. It's safe because in the fantasy—or, let's say, if it's acted out in the choreography of the sex, the other person is strong and confident and dominant—by definition, then, NOT hurt, offended, burdened, drained, or harmed in any way. Guilt goes away, safety is established, and sexual desire and pleasure can be let out and experienced fully.

I've treated many couples who consult with me about problems in their sex lives. Invariably, one partner complains that the other partner doesn't take charge enough. They want the other person to be more self-confident and selfish so that neither person is worrying about the other and can let go in bed more freely.

There is something about sexual arousal and desire that is inherently selfish. I call this sexual ruthlessness. We talk all the time in our culture about the importance of empathy and communication in good sex. And that's true and important—Without it, sex is like, well, it might as well be mutual masturbation. But we can forget that there is a dimension of good sex in which we want to let go and collide with another person—sometimes even forcefully—without having to worry about that other person's inner life. One woman described her mounting arousal and excitement during sex as feeling like a wave pounding on the shore. She didn't want to have to worry if the shore could "take it."

This experience that we seek has an inherently selfish dimension. But if you grow up feeling guilty about being too selfish, then you're vulnerable to feeling guilty about the selfish part of sex. If a fantasy helps you feel less guilty, then it frees up your libido.

Another feeling that makes sexual excitement dangerous is shame. Like guilt, you can't feel a maximum amount of sexual pleasure if you're feeling ashamed. And lots of us grow up with beliefs about—and SHAME about—the various ways that we're defective or inferior or unlovable.

But like with guilt, sexual fantasies come to the rescue and help us overcome shame as well as guilt on the road to sexual arousal. If one gets aroused by fantasies or real situations in which one is viewed by others as intensely sexually attractive and/or desirable—almost like an exhibitionistic fantasy—then THAT qualifies as a sexual fantasy that involves overcoming shame. You are desirable, not defective. Moreover, some people are attracted to situations in which they seduce someone who is otherwise unavailable or who has some sort of high status that normally might appear out of reach. That implied fantasy here is that you are *so* appealing, *so* magnetically attractive that the other person is willing to take a risk or overcome an obstacle or otherwise throw caution to the winds in order to have you. This helps you transcend—to overcome—the inhibitory effects of feelings of inferiority and shame.

So, we can see, I hope, how sexual fantasies or preferences help us fulfill one of our most basic human aims and needs—namely, our need to feel sexual pleasure and to sexually connect with others.

But how might it also help us understand someone’s psychology? Well, if fantasies are the key that unlock an inhibition, an inhibition that is based on feelings of guilt or shame, they by knowing the shape of the key—knowing the fantasy—we can infer the shape of the lock—in this case, the thing that underneath it all is inhibiting pleasure. And if something is inhibiting us in the bedroom, it’s almost certainly inhibiting us in other areas of our lives.

Let’s say someone is especially attracted to people who are tall, strong, athletic, or who just seems tough. Just knowing that, we can infer that the person likely struggles with feelings about being too strong or too selfish and, therefore, of hurting others—and that’s what determines their sexual preference. Or let’s say someone has a history of sexual entanglements with teachers, therapists, or even- say – politicians. Without ignoring the fact that that person has likely been exploited, we might also see that his or her attraction to unavailable authority figures might reflect an unconscious solution to problems of feeling inadequate or inferior.

FREUD SAID THAT DREAMS WERE “THE ROYAL ROAD TO THE UNCONSCIOUS”

I’d argue that understanding the secret logic of sexual fantasies can get us there quicker.

The Ted K Archive

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