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The 'problem' of sexual fantasies

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This essay explores the nature and implications of sexual fantasies. The essay begins from the apparent paradox that while it is frequently condemned for its absolute explicitness ('leaving nothing to the imagination') it is at the same time condemned for arousing 'uncontrollable fantasies'. Several strands of theorization are reviewed, attending in particular to their shared assumption that such fantasies are essentially compensatory – making up for either stored-up problems from childhood or signs of inadequacy in a person's sexual maturation. Challenging these accounts, the essay draws on evidence from a major investigation into the meanings and pleasures of pornography conducted in 2011, which garnered more than 5000 responses to a complex online questionnaire combining quantitative and qualitative questions. Ten motivations for using and enjoying sexual fantasies are distinguished, within which five distinct ways of understanding the relations between pornography and fantasy are outlined: as magnifying glass, as mirror to self, as emporium, as journey, and as alternative self. These are understood as productive of new sexual possibilities.

Keywords: sexual fantasy; porn research project; paradox of explicitness; body genres

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Introduction

In May 2013, the UK Children's Commissioner released what it termed a Rapid Evidence Assessment (REA) on the state of research into children's experiences of pornography. This is the third such report in recent years, the others having come from Linda Papadopoulos (2010) and Reg Bailey (2011), into the 'sexualisation of young people' (Horvath et al. 2013).[1] Various commentators have pointed to a number of the weaknesses in the first two reports.[2] The most striking thing about the third report is a series of deeply embedded assumptions, revealed by its insistent use of the word 'exposed'. Children are 'exposed' to pornography – a wording carried no less than 66 times in the REA. The fact that such a way of conceiving how people encounter sexual or indeed any other kinds of materials was long ago questioned passes them by completely – an ignoring nicely in line with the REA's dismissive attitude towards research which showed that, where young people do look at pornography, the motives for doing so range from 'masturbation', to 'wanting to know more about sex', to 'curiosity', and to 'boredom'. Such motives for looking do not fit well with the working model of cumulative effect, corrupting influence, and slippery slope to doom, all of which is set in motion by that word 'exposed'.

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But just as striking about the REA is this. If 'exposed' gets used 66 times, another concept gets used just three times: 'fantasy'. This is despite one of the questions the REA is supposed to be exploring being: 'Is evidence available on how children and young people perceive the content of pornography? Is there evidence that distinguishes between such perceptions in terms of fantasy and reality?' These questions are oddly unclear, and really only make sense as sideways allusions to the popular notion of a possible 'confusion' between the two, a notion that is deeply rooted in moral thinking about cultural matters, as evidenced by the following sentence from a recent Papal declaration:

> Frequent exposure to violence in the media can be confusing to children, who may not be able to distinguish readily between fantasy and reality. At a later stage, violence in the media can condition impressionable persons, especially those who are young, to regard this as normal and acceptable behaviour, suitable for imitation.' (Pontifical Council for Social Relations 1989)

How should we think about the relations between pornography and sexual fantasies? What are the questions that need asking, and what bodies of work exist that can inform these? In this essay I draw on some of the findings and materials from the research project mounted by Clarissa Smith, Feona Attwood and myself, into people's engagements with online pornography. Although the issue of 'fantasy' was not one we directly enquired into, it emerged through the materials we gathered. This is an expanded version of a presentation made to the Onscenity Conference at Brunel University, UK in 2012. Because of its origins in that, it does not claim to offer a full answer based on a grounded body of research evidence. Instead, I hope that it provides the bases for a rethinking of this difficult topic.

I begin with a paradox, and one I have not found addressed in any of the literature in this area. In public complaints about pornography, it is very common for people to protest that pornography 'leaves nothing to the imagination'; it is the literal showing of genitals and sexual activities, and that very literalness is seen to be a danger.[3] Often, peculiarly, this comment is associated with a degree of titillation – it is the *nearly naked* bodies of stars or celebrities who call out this comment (having gone this far, might they go further …?).[4] Yet at the same time it is this very literalness that somehow generates a fear of sexual 'fantasy'; in particular, the danger that people – or, young men specifically – might 'blur or lose the distinction between fantasy and reality'.[5] This paradox points us to a realization that this notion of 'fantasy' is doing a lot of persuasive work. Of course there are ways in which the paradox can be resolved, but the point is that the very steps required to resolve it reveal much about the unstated cultural work that talk in this area performs. If, for instance, the argument is that pornography, with its explicitness, creates a fantasy world where women are always willing to perform extreme acts, leading to demands for the same from 'real women', then at least the following (arguable) steps are involved: the fantasy status of this world has to be invisible to the people who visit it; all the acts and scenarios in the porn world have to point and draw in one single direction, to add up to a 'myth'; and the reasons for visiting and using the world have to be such that they will tend to 'spill over' into lived relationships. We will see that there are many reasons to doubt all of these.

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Research on sexual fantasies

In this section I want to review briefly, and inevitably selectively, some of the principal forms of thinking about the concept of 'fantasy'. In fact the concept comes with a great deal of clobber, which has in turn meant that the general term has its own literature, which I have tried to address elsewhere (Barker 2009). The launch-point is the collection of commonsense assumptions that surround the term 'fantasy', and which come acutely into vision when contrasted with the word 'imagination'. A crude but recognizable depiction of the standard images of 'fantasy' might be the following:

- Fantasy is wild, undisciplined imagining.
- Fantasy involves childish and immature attitudes.
- Fantasies are erroneous, unsupportable beliefs.
- Generically, fantasies are other-worldly stories populated by stereotyped characters.
- Fantasists are people who are unable to function normally, too disconnected.

'Imagination' meanwhile tends to carry a series of positive opposites: it is seen to imply creativity, artfulness, orientation to the future, and a rich vitality that makes redundant any question about its 'reality'. It is small wonder that a great deal of the general literature has been designed to fend off the accusatory nature of these, or to demarcate some bit (notably, the 'literary fantastic') as the reputable opposite of this disreputable Other.

But there is also a long literature specifically on sexual fantasies, beginning with Freud, for whom they moved (across his life) from being the playback of real traumatic experiences to being the outcome of other repressed problems, released in distorted form. With important changes, this tradition continues to this day, as we will see. A good example of this, recently, has been Michael Bader's (2002) *Arousal*.[6] Bader builds an account of the nature and role of sexual fantasies out of his encounters with many of his patients. It is a subtle book, full of complex insights into people's tensions and ambivalences over sex. The 'story' it tells is not of a simple cause/effect relationship, but of the *defraying* of tensions into fantastical sexual impulses. But out of his cases emerges a model that in the end treats pretty much all sexual fantasies as being of the same kind. We might take as an example his account of 'Jan', a woman who finds it difficult to get aroused except by fantasizing a hard, controlling man – something which runs counter to her political beliefs. Bader offers an account of her own fantasy, in terms of her problematic relations with her parents; in particular her father, whom she saw as weak, but was afraid to hurt by showing her independence. So Jan:

> solved the problem by creating a male character so powerful and selfish that she knows she can't hurt him. His selfishness gave her a kind of permission to be selfish herself. She doesn't have to worry about him and so can surrender to her own excitement without guilt or responsibility. Jan has found a way to be safely ruthless, and her reward is intense sexual pleasure. (Bader 2002, 32)

This *possible* story takes on credibility from his underlying post-Freudian theory: that sexual fantasies generally are compensatory. They are the distorted management of childhood problems and traumas, almost always family generated. What *count* as

people's senses of safety, emotional possibilities and relationships are all the product of 'home'. In Bader's world, there appears to be no school, no horizontal relationships, no local communities, no values, no educational experiences, no body or sexual cultures. Other influences are 'outside', and almost inevitably corrupting – as when, for instance, he writes of media messages as 'bombarding' individuals. Childhood lays down pretty much all the parameters through which we live. Adulthood appears to be without stages, or development. And the key underlying concept is 'safety'. In this model, risk-taking is inconceivable as a choice in its own right.

I have little doubt that there are people for whom home life and parental control are so hermetic and fraught that they lay down the major conditions for subsequent emotional and sexual life. But this is to treat a certain model of the family, one that rings a kind of perverse version of *The Waltons* (the highly stereotyped small-town US television series from the 1970s), as a template. It is captured in persistent universalizing claims – such as 'the guilt that boys feel about leaving their mothers, and enjoying their masculinity' (Bader 2002, 218); 'We all suffer from some kind of survivor or separation guilt' (2002, 22). It combines with a weird assumption that the only situations in which people talk about fantasies is when in therapy. In fact, we might well think about a whole variety of social spaces – comedy, teenage magazines, friendship groups, and, of course, online resources – as being ones in which public conversations about sexuality go on and (for most people) interact with whatever models of self and behaviour parents generate in their children.

What this model cannot conceive is that sexual fantasies might be *productive*, in the sense that they might be the means through which adults try out versions of self-in-sexual-society, reimagining themselves through others' reimaginings. Bader comes closest to acknowledging the productive possibilities of fantasy when he honestly faces up to the challenge that many of his patients, even if he has 'disclosed their origins' and they accept his 'story', still find their fantasies attractive and exciting. Why, he asks? Because they give pleasure, a thrill. But this, weakly, turns pleasure into a residue, something we cannot quite get rid of.

More influential today (because of a general 'fall from grace' of Freudian explanations) is the body of work deriving from the American experimental psychological tradition. The typical questions, methods and outcomes of this kind of research were well captured in a 1995 essay by Leitenberg and Henning. They list a long series of questions psychologists have been interested to ask, among them: how many people have sexual fantasies and when? How often? What are their most common and most popular kinds? Are there gender differences in all these? When do people first have sexual fantasies, and do they change with age and experience? Has there been any change in frequency or content over recent decades? Are there cross-cultural similarities or differences? How often do people feel guilty about sexual fantasies, and what effects does guilt have? And of course, do sexual fantasies predict behaviour? Their review of the evidence is interesting in many ways, not least because by this time old assumptions about gender differences were waning, and it was widely accepted (at least within research communities) that women can enjoy sexual fantasies as much as men. Perhaps the most striking finding to emerge from their review is the conclusion that the inclusion of fantasy within a person's sexual repertoire is associated with *increases* in experienced sexual pleasure and achievement of orgasm. In the other direction, feelings of guilt about fantasy in turn reduce pleasure. So, contrary to Freud's account, 'sexual fantasies occur most often in those

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people who exhibit the least number of sexual problems and the least sexual dissatisfaction' (Leitenberg and Henning 1995, 490). But for all its summary value, what is striking is the essay's complete dedication to laboratory experimentation as the only route to knowledge. People's own accounts of how, why, in what ways and with what results they fantasize have no place in this tradition.

It is important to note how strong are the connections between this mode of thinking and the highly normative tradition of American psychology. A fair example would be Robert Maniglio's (2010) recent meta-review of work on violence and deviant sexual fantasizing – which disappointingly does not attempt to define what *counts* as 'deviant'. This taken-for-granted category is then simply used as a pot into which to put large numbers of pieces of research, all insistently seeking to measure its potential danger. Most peculiarly, having created this normative game, the 'rules of science' intervene and Maniglio has to conclude that the evidence is weak and contradictory – and that if there is any evidence, it is that it requires the combination of fantasizing with having had an abusive childhood to produce anything like definite results.

It is also important to see the paradoxical associations with an obsession with evolutionary psychology (particularly American in many respects, but certainly to be found more widely), with its penchant for stories claiming that men are naturally polygamous while women want the safety of a monogamous relationship for the sake of their children.[7]

One of the striking things about their essay is the uneasiness with which they address the issue of women and 'force fantasies'. At least since the work of Nancy Friday (1981), it has been recognized that many women do in fact fantasize being forced to have sex of many different kinds and in many different situations.[8] This is however 'dangerous knowledge', because of the risk that it might be taken by men as evidence for 'rape myths': that women secretly enjoy being raped.[9] This is unresolved – except for an insistence (not contained in their data) that the *way* women fantasize about rape situations really and actually leaves them in control. It is not *really* rape. And the flipside of this is that exploring heterosexual men's sexual fantasies is like peeking inside the minds of potential criminals.

The latter has been a major underpinning for work in which the distinction between pornography and male fantasies has been almost obliterated. Since Robin Morgan's (1977) declaration that 'Pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice' (333), a recurrent body of critical feminist work has identified pornography as a 'violent imaginary' tied inextricably to misogyny and male violence. Although it is always risky to pick one piece of work to represent a whole tradition, it is not unreasonable for my purposes here to choose Natalie Purcell's (2012) *Violence and the Pornographic Imaginary*, not least because her opening chapter directly debates what she sees as a false line of defence of pornography (as indeed I do); that it is 'only fantasy'. Her title indicates pretty strongly where she will go: that pornography represents a singular drive to set the ways that men imagine women to be – and that this is one deeply infected by contempt, hatred, domination and exploitation. Her case is persuasive – providing, that is, one takes her 'history' of porn films from the 1970s (which seems to show a steady worsening into deeper and nastier forms of exploitation) as accurate and one does not know what she leaves out (e.g. the deepening crisis of the Hollywood porn industry, in the face of an ever-rising amount of amateur porn production, of many kinds). But it is the half-implicit argument that

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bothers me most: that 'pornography' is a singular thing (the 'imaginary'), with an inherent tendency to get more extreme, and more gross, and that what happens there then becomes a sign of what men and heterosexual masculinity are veering into – a doom scenario lifted only in about the last five lines of her book.

In all these approaches, then, sexual fantasies are seen as essentially unproductive; at best of limited value; at worst, adolescent, deficient, and dangerous. They have one singular nature and purpose: to arouse. If not dangerous, then they need careful management. And mixed with pornography, they are overwhelmingly seen as *bad*. I want to question all these prevailing assumptions.

In responding to these critical accounts, I want to pick up on and develop the very important lines of investigation opened by Linda Williams' essay on 'body genres'. In this influential essay, Williams (1991) considers three genres: horror (associated with shock and fear); melodrama (weeping); and pornography (sexual arousal). She wants to challenge the low status such genres customarily have just because of their association with evoked bodily responses. Interestingly, she associates each of these genres with a paralleling 'fantasy'. But in a curious way, her essay could be seen to collude in that accorded low status. This happens in several ways. By narrowing her focus to just these three, there is a temptation to see their bodily correlates as primitive, even pre-rational. Even to add the most obvious missing fourth – comedy (laughter) – begins to complexify things: not just because laughter is almost inconceivable (except through the most basic physical slapstick) without attendant knowledges, and understandings, but also because of how quickly we are forced to multiply kinds. There is verbal humour, situational humour, character humour, audience-play humour, cringe/embarrassment humour, and so on. But a second element rather pulls us back from this complexification: her use of a language of 'mimicking' (Williams 1991, 4) to characterize how we might relate to what is in such films. This shows the power, still, inside such valuable work of problematic notions such as 'identification' – although at the very end of her essay she does openly acknowledge that 'we may be wrong in our assumption that the bodies of spectators simply reproduce the sensations exhibited by the bodies on screen' (1991, 12).

But if we take seriously the way bodily responses might be permeated with and through all aspects and parts of our responses (as is suggested by phenomenological film approaches, for example), we could easily extend the list well beyond four kinds. Bodily responses could include: aesthetic awe and wonderment (which can accompany spectacle of many kinds); feelings of caring and sympathy (as we learn about people undergoing great trauma); being drained and exhausted by extreme experiences (as we encounter dire situations); our responses to great effort or energy (visions of prolonged and testing physical activity); cosiness and comfort experiences (deriving from well-known and well-loved media); and so on. The value in this lies not simply in the multiplication of kinds of bodily response, nor in the fact that some of them would probably be accorded higher cultural value, but in the way it should encourage us to look back at pornography and to recognize the variable and complex ways that its associated bodily responses could play out in relation to audiences' knowledges, wishes and hopes.

This brief review hopefully highlights the ways in which much theory and research is deeply coloured by the commonsense articulations of 'fantasy' as primal and wild. In response to this, I want to offer evidence that challenges both its presumed *singularity* and its *wildness*.

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Methodology

The materials from which this essay draws were gathered in the course of a project mounted in 2011 by Clarissa Smith, Feona Attwood and myself.[10] This project centred on an online questionnaire, mounted on the Web, and available for approximately four months. The questionnaire combined quantitative questions (mixing requests for demographic information with choices from categorical lists) with qualitative questions (asking people to explain their choices, likes and dislikes, and history with porn). After advertising and explaining the research's purpose, we attracted 5490 completions.

Because we recruited opportunistically, we make no claims for the 'representativeness' of our responses. But that is also partly because it is not clear what would count as the 'population' that might have been sampled. Instead, we aimed to recruit widely, by age, sex, orientation, and level of involvement with porn, with a questionnaire structure that would allow us to search for patterns *within and among* responses. So, while the later Figures 1 and 2 are certainly interesting for what they show about the overall spread of our responses, they become more revealing and valuable when subjected to cross-tabulation and pattern-searching for connections and distinctions. For instance, the fact that women generally show lower levels of investment and frequency of use than men in porn is important. But to know that this difference decreases the younger the women is surely a striking discovery.

Nevertheless, this is not what this essay aims or claims to do. Instead, it draws simply on the rich variety of responses that we obtained – or, as we might rather put

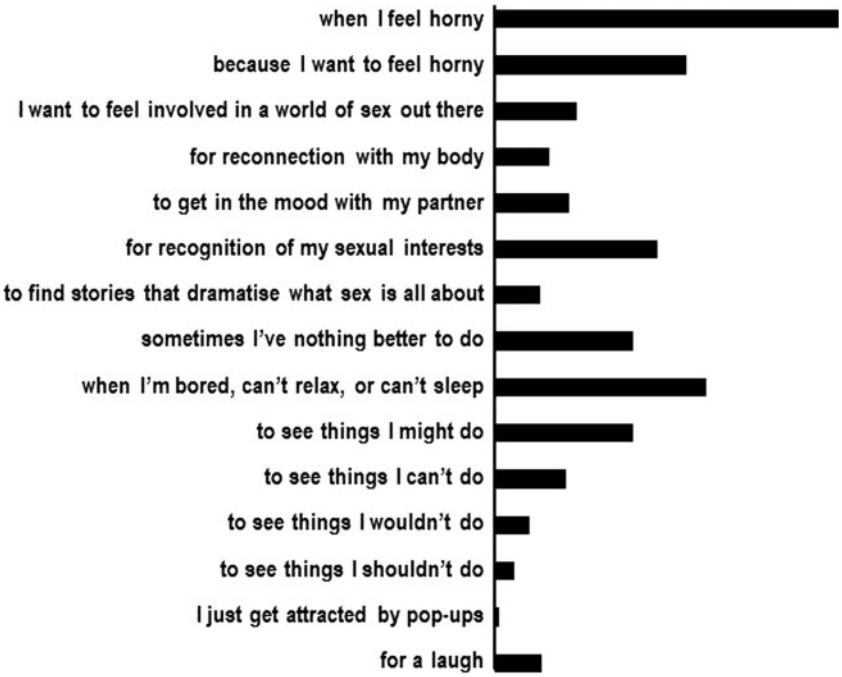

Figure 1. Reasons for looking at porn: distribution of responses to multiple-choice question with the option to choose up to three from the list.

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Figure 2. Distribution of responses to the 'Meanings of Sex' question with the option to choose up to three from the list.

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it, were trusted with. Readers familiar with the recent history of cultural studies-influenced audience research (i.e. research interested in the meaning and use of media and culture in people's daily lives, and therefore using methods that seek to gather audiences' working understandings, evaluations and self-perceptions) will recognize that a first level of discovery is, very commonly, *variety* and *diversity*. Simply, when you give audiences of any kind the chance to speak for themselves, the first thing that you find is that they differ from each other, and usually in ways which were not anticipated by the researchers. Their distribution and frequency is a matter for further and different research.[11] Such research has from the earliest days been of most importance, and been most controversial, when it addressed dismissed or derogated audiences – who rarely if ever get the chance to speak for themselves. But there are of course important issues raised by how we listen to audiences talking about themselves. Their languages are not transparent, any more than are theorists' languages. It is interesting to compare what might be made of two apparently similar claims. Elizabeth Cowie, in a frequently cited essay, advances the psychoanalytic precept that sexual fantasies display the 'desire to desire' (1992, 141); how is that like or unlike our participants choosing to agree with our expression 'When I want to feel horny' (see Figure 1)? The difference surely lies in at least this: we can ask *who* says this, and what they say about when and how they feel this (and immediately note that this is disproportionately chosen by women, while its 'pair', 'When I feel horny', was more chosen by men). For Cowie, this is a supervening claim apparently equally applicable to everyone. This to me marks one of the fundamental differences enacted

by the turn to audience research, as against the more theory-driven accounts generated within cultural studies and related domains.

It is important to note at the outset that the topic of 'fantasy' was not raised directly in our questionnaire, with the exception of one mention of the word in the list of 15 possible orientations to sex as a whole (see Figure 2 for these). However, a substantial proportion of our participants spontaneously raised the issue. Before proceeding to try to understand the range of meanings these answers disclose, it is important to think a little about the other 50%. It is in fact important to note that a number of other motives and interests shine through our responses. Sheer curiosity is one of them. A good number of people, in particular those with lower levels of interest and lower frequencies of use, simply want to look from time to time to 'see what it is all about'. Second, a proportion of our respondents specifically say that they use porn in order to learn about particular sexual activities or techniques – as in 'I wanted to learnt how to give a good blow job', 'I learnt how to do cunnilingus'. These are examples of the things that people say porn assists them with. Thirdly, and not to be discounted, respondents say that a major function of porn is simply to arouse them, sexually: 'I wanted to be aroused', 'it helped me to be aroused', 'it's nothing to do with fantasy, it just engaged my body'. To borrow a valuable expression from Susanna Paasonen (2011), porn 'resonated' with them. Finally, a not inconsiderable aspect is simply the desire to look at bodies, and especially beautiful ones. This is the opportunity that porn gives. People gain the entitlement to look at beautiful bodies, details of bodies, bodies of different kinds. This is a factor in itself, which people will compare with looking at paintings, or listening to music, or gazing at landscapes. It is important to bear this in mind as we consider what 'fantasy' might give over and above these four motives and interests.

Findings

Nearly one-half of our participants mentioned the issue of 'fantasy', overwhelmingly in their responses to one particular question: Q7 – 'How do you feel pornography contributes to the place of sex in your life? What would you miss if you had no opportunity to look at it anymore?' In total, 2308 respondents introduced the idea of 'fantasy' or 'imagination' into at least one of their answers. Strikingly, more than twice as many women (36%) as men (15%) chose to talk about fantasy. By smaller margins, greater numbers of younger than older respondents referred to it. However, there was no relationship between mentioning 'fantasy' and attaching importance to porn – it appears to be a way of relating to porn that can work for anyone.

Using these responses means that this essay is not attempting to look at the *content* of people's sexual fantasies – although a number of people did tell us this, either in answer to Q7 or in responding to our invitation to say what pornographic experience they had found 'most exciting'. My focus instead is on the *perceived nature, purpose and role* of sexual fantasies. Some answers that mention 'fantasy' are so short and casual that it is hard to draw out any distinct meanings. For example:

> I would miss the fantasy aspect of it.
> If I lost the opportunity to look at it, I would miss the variety and fantasy aspects of it.
> I would miss it because it helps with my fantasy life.

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The one characteristic here is that 'fantasy' is not conceived as the *entirety* of porn – it is an aspect, a feature. In order to broach what this aspect is, and how it relates to the larger whole, longer and more elaborated answers are required. To obtain these, I random-sampled 100 answers to Q7, asking what kinds of interest and use were implied by the answers. Ten dimensions emerged – each of which appears to point to and imply a distinctive *orientation* to pornography – what it is for, how therefore it is characteristically found and used, what kinds may be preferred, and so on.

Expanding sexual scenarios

> It expands the bounds of what I know and see. It is food for fantasy, inspiration and expression. Sex is about connection – and sometimes sex is the connection. Porn is about expansion, arousal and acceptance.

The motive in this kind of answer is for the expansion of sexual horizons, new ways of bringing sex into one's life. Seeking variety and novelty is a motive in itself. Pornography provides a person like this with resources of reimagining their own sex life, in ways they could not do by themselves.

Story-telling and role-playing

> When my girlfriend (I'm a lesbian) is around we watch it/look at it together and then have nice hot sex since we're both horny. We also role-play and write out fantasy sex scenes together. The role-play I would miss greatly, but porn generated by other people isn't all that necessary.

Here, the point precisely is to find things that two people can share. Finding and then using the kinds of things that will be arousing for both is the critical measure.

Easy means to arousal

> It keeps me interested and charged up. If I didn't have it as a fantasy tool, I might lose interest.

The motive here is importantly different. A person such as this is aware of the ordinary limits to their capacity for arousal, but they want more. Answers of this kind associate strongly with choice of the offered orientation; that 'Sex keeps you happy and healthy, physically and emotionally'. It is a component in the investment in the *idea of being sexual*.

The lost world of sex

> I would miss the fantasy, the escapism of it I guess, but only in a nostalgic way, and it's always going to be there. That's a big thing about porn – the easy accessibility.

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This is a kind of answer particularly associated with older respondents, ones for whom both opportunities and desires for sex may have become restricted or desires have declined. Porn recalls what they have been, and it is 'escapism' because in a way it returns them to their youth. The youthfulness of most porn bodies therefore is important for this purpose.

The separate world, to be cautiously deployed

> I know it is all fantasy, and some of the acts I see and masturbate to I would probably not ask my wife to do in real life. Porn allows me to experience, even if remotely, that which I don't have.

Porn is here something whose existence provides a kind of commentary on this man's relatively unsatisfactory sex life. In his case, he holds it separate. In other cases, it puts zest into sexual encounters, even as it is marked off as separate, as here: 'I believe the porn does raise the libido, and helps imagination and fantasy, which translates into more effort in the bed. But porn and sex are different things'.

The attraction of fictional scenarios

> I would miss the fantasy part where strange situations are arousing.

In this short answer the key word is 'strange'. For such a person it is the fascination of that which they themselves can hardly conceive being in, of possibilities beyond their own, that arouses.

A substitute for fantasy

> Porn allows me an outlet for sexual feelings. My wife and I don't have sex as frequently as I'd like, so I think I'll always have a need for self-stimulation. Without porn, little would change – I'd just rely on fantasy.

What is so interesting about this kind of answer is that porn is *not* fantasy – it is a substitute for not having enough sex, but it does work in place of having to arouse oneself independently. Porn is here a *convenience*, what another respondent called 'just like fantasy in shorthand', or another: 'takes fantasy and mental effort out of masturbation'.

Commitment to having a 'fantasy life'

> Porn is often about fantasy – some which I'd like to live out and some which I wouldn't. It's important for me to keep it separate from reality though. I would miss it if I didn't have the chance to look at it anymore. I think that having a fantasy life is important.

Note here the distinction between *particular* fantasies and *having a fantasy life*. For some, the idea of a 'fantasy life' is a mark of personal weakness:

> I would miss the creativity of porn. It is, admittedly, a bit lazy that I can just watch/read without thinking myself, but I don't have a strong fantasy life and don't normally fantasize while masturbating. Without porn, I'd be just as horny, but possibly more boring.

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For others, it is a sign of strength:

> I think that porn has shown me a much wider variety of different sex acts that I enjoy and want to try with partners. I don't think that I would miss much, though, as I also have an active fantasy life in my own head that isn't premised on porn.

The emergent world of BDSM

> I would miss it. It allows fantasy part of it. Kinks that I normally wouldn't do in real life or could be dangerous, I can see in porn.

The gradual recognition of the underground world of fetishes, bondage, sado-masochism and the like has enabled these practices to lay down ground-rules. You have to know *how* to use bondage safely but also excitingly. Punishment and pain as part of sex are things to be understood and performed properly, whether through doing them or just watching others do them. As another put it: 'if not for porn I might not have had the confidence or knowledge to explore a kink, act, or fantasy with a partner, in ways that have been very rewarding and fulfilling'.

A world of sex 'out there', which validates the viewer

> It contributes to a feeling of validation – that others enjoy things similarly to myself, and that I'm not the only one who enjoys sex and sexuality. If I had no opportunity, I'd miss the visual erotic cues, and the imagination/fantasy stimuli.

The key word in here is surely 'sexuality'. This is an orientation where it is more than the specific acts or even sexual preferences that is at stake. It is the idea that sex is a driving part of a person's identity. To be alone in that is hard and uncomfortable. To find resources that confirm one's sexual identity helps to warrant such a person's sense of self. Unsurprisingly, this kind of answer comes particularly from lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans* and queer respondents (see Smith, Attwood, and Barker forthcoming). Another puts it slightly differently, but the connections are, I think, plain: 'Porn makes sex "okay", it democratizes it. Everyone has it, and it's fun, and it doesn't have to be a huge deal'.

Re-theorizing 'fantasy's' relation to pornography

I began by noting the odd paradox that while pornography is effectively *defined by* its explicitness, it is surrounded and permeated by claims about its role *as fantasy*. For critics, this is an important basis for their claims about its dangers. But we have seen that for those who seek out and enjoy porn, 'fantasy' is very varied and multiform in purpose. What then does this variety suggest about the main roles that porn can play, beyond being simply arousing and instructive? Perhaps the most important implication to emerge from this variety is that there look to be a number of distinct *orientations* towards pornography. By 'orientation' I mean that people relate to it in different ways, in terms of: how they seek out and select what to look at; the different criteria they have for what is satisfying and exciting, or

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disappointing, disturbing or disgusting; and their different 'careers' into and through pornography, and how these relate to other parts of their personal histories and lives. A person whose use of pornography turns around role-playing with a partner will orient in this sense quite differently from someone for whom porn is mainly a means to keep alive a sex life in the absence of a willing partner. A person who is testing and forming his or her sexual identity, in a period of life-uncertainty, will choose and make use of materials quite differently to a person who simply wishes to be aroused and satisfied speedily. The entire *mode of use* will be different. Perhaps the one thing that never happens, and certainly not with the force intended by those who use the term, is that people are 'exposed' to pornography – the miniscule numbers saying that they have been 'attracted by pop-ups' clearly indicates this.

Very tentatively – and aware that these need to be the basis both of more *thinking* (to clarify their meaning and implications) and *testing* (to find and explore people who exemplify these) – I want to sketch five broad orientations. These are, if you will, my proposals for shifting thinking away from the five widely-claimed dimensions of fantasy in uncritical thinking. The charges were that: fantasy comprises wild, undisciplined imaginings; these imaginings are by nature childish or immature; fantasies entail erroneous, unsupportable beliefs; generically, fantasies are other-worldly stories populated by stereotyped characters; and fantasists are people who are unable to function normally, too disconnected. In opposition to these I offer the following as catching the roles that what people call 'fantasies' play for them.

1. 'Fantasy' as magnifying glass: a conscious accentuation of a desire.
2. 'Fantasy' as mirror to self: a means to look at our responses to things.
3. 'Fantasy' as emporium: a world of possibilities to be explored and thought about.
4. 'Fantasy' as journey: a visitation to a distant realm of desires and activities.
5. 'Fantasy' as other self: what I might or might not be.

These five dimensions are evidently at work within the responses of our 5490 participants. And as accounts of the relations between these people and their experiences of pornography, these are *neither good nor bad in themselves*. Each of these *can* be used constructively, to explore and build sexual relations of great power and pleasure. Equally, each of them *can* be used exploitatively and hurtfully. What does not make sense is the idea of 'losing the distinction between fantasy and reality'. This is an illusory notion, made possible simply by a linguistic oddity. One might as well worry if people might lose the distinction between cooking and reality.[12]

What next?

This essay, and the investigations that underpin it, were not planned as major outcomes of the porn research project. The evidence drawn upon here arose from a very early stage of analysis. Earlier I indicated that *variety* and *range* are typical first-level discoveries in audience research of this kind. Subsequent levels depend on cross-tabulations, pattern-searching, model-building and qualitative mapping. An illustration of these further processes may help. In our overall responses, males constituted

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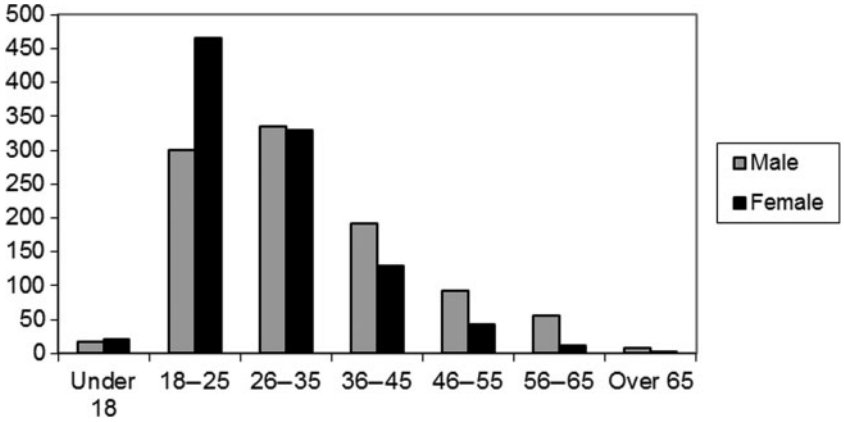

Figure 3. Distribution of male and female responses by age group.

nearly 70% of all responses, females just over 30% (Figure 3) . Further, males overall were more frequent users of pornography and attached a higher level of importance than females. However, cross-tabulation of age and gender produced a surprising result.

Female respondents are skewed more strongly than males to the younger age groups. Examination of importance and frequency gives a complicated picture. Younger women are less likely to attach importance, but more likely to look at it frequently. But they are slightly less likely to mention 'fantasy' or 'imagination' in their qualitative responses (25.8% vs. 31.6%). This suggests that some complex cultural meanings are at play among younger women that will require careful unpacking. Whatever this turns out to signify, it is surely a striking discovery.

Concluding thoughts

I began by noting some of the tensions and difficulties in our current thinking about the nature, sources and motives for sexual fantasies – among which is the continued dominance of a 'mass communication' model that combines an adherence to laboratory experiments with a model that sees sexuality as primal, and pornography as the equivalent of a drug that reduces self-control. However, I want to return to one recent strand of this US research, which – for all of its tendency to fall back on those deep-seated weaknesses – has significant potential for redirecting our thinking about sexual fantasies.

Meredith Chivers, in a sequence of researches over the last decade (Chivers et al. 2004; Chivers and Bailey 2005; Chivers, Seto, and Grimbos 2010), has drawn attention to a curious disparity between male and female sexual responsiveness. In experimental situations, men show some physiological arousal when shown soft porn sequences of other males' sexual behaviour, but more when watching women's. When asked about their levels of arousal with the different materials, their answers broadly coincide with their physical responses. Women on the other hand show stronger physiological responses when shown both women and men engaged in sexual activity – even showing responses to watching bonobos (a species of apes) having sex, something that did not arouse the men at all. But most strikingly, the

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women's self-reports varied greatly from their measured physiological responses, either not noticing or denying their own arousal.

Chivers is clear about the ways in which these findings challenge traditional notions of the innate polygamous male versus monogamous female tendencies, otherwise pitched as men's interest in having many partners and being aroused simply by sight, with women needing touch, and closeness and caring to become interested in sex. Beyond this, she is cautious about theorizing her results, beyond raising in a general way the notion that a conflict between biology and culture is occurring.[13] This caution may arise in part from the very tendency in American intellectual traditions to work with a pretty crude nature/nurture distinction,[14] and to view 'culture' as little more than a system of pressures and constraints, rather than, for instance, as the structure of ways in which we belong in history and society, and know ourselves within those.

The fact of this disjunction between physiological responses and self-reports is not just interesting for what it reveals about women's arousal tendencies, but for what it indicates about human sexuality as a whole. Remember that the experiment involved showing men and women representations of other people and creatures engaged in sex. Bodies respond, and in doing so raise in us the *very idea of sex and sexuality*. We are creatures who not only desire sex, but can enjoy the idea of desiring. As we grow up, we become aware of the *possibility* of sex. We are learning to notice our bodies' responses to possibilities and opportunities for it, and finding out about what interests and arouses and excites us: our sexual identity. In between those responses, our feeling and understanding of them, and the world that delivers possibilities and constraints, is the field of sexuality. This is the zone of knowing and imagining how sex works, rewards and punishes. 'Fantasy' belongs here, in the zone of the relations between bodies, selfhood, and social and cultural permissions and forbiddings. All three are necessary, and the thinking and feeling of the relations between them is the fundamental basis of sexual lives. This is how and why the utterly explicit in pornography, the 'leaving nothing to the imagination', is at that exact same point the *most* fantastical. In this sense we might usefully see pornography as being like a huge library, a bookshop, or a film archive. Even to know that it is there, that it has something like a catalogue, is to begin to measure one's sexual self against all that it might offer.

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Notes

1. The very notion of a 'rapid' assessment is of course that this topic is so suddenly urgent, so new and expanding, that we cannot wait for reflection. Actually, rapidity is the last thing needed right now; rather, we could badly do with some self-critical thinking about the state and status of evidence and understanding.
2. See Smith (2010) and the various blogs at http://www.onscenity.org/sexualization/.
3. Controversy in Cannes as top honour awarded to film with lesbian sex scenes 'that leave nothing to the imagination' (Baginboye 2013). And of course porn sites themselves will publicize this as a promise – see, for instance, 'with her legs spread wide she leaves nothing to the imagination' (www.xvideos.com/).
4. See as an instance 'Andrea Lowell Leaves Nothing To Your Imagination' (YouTube, January 20, 2007) or 'Taylor Armstrong's Tiny Bikini Leaves Literally Nothing to the Imagination' (June 12, 2013; http://thestir.cafemom.com/beauty_style/156844/taylor_armstrongs_tiny_bikini_leaves).

5. As examples: *New Statesman* writer Glosswitch (2013), 'I don't think rape fantasies excuse the proliferation of uncontextualized rape photographs that can be found online. There – confronted with real bodies in real positions – I don't see how it's possible to tell the difference between fantasy and reality'; Wendy Maltz (2010), 'The consensus was that pornography became a problem only when the viewer couldn't distinguish between fantasy sex and real sex (believing, for example, that women enjoy being raped), or was using it in ways that endangered children (leaving it out where it could be seen), or harmed trust in an intimate relationship (pressuring a partner to do something he/she didn't want to do)'; and Deborah Orr (2011), 'Sexual fantasy and sexual reality are not the same thing'.
6. See also Brett Kahr (2009) for another major study that shares a good number of Bader's tendencies.
7. See, for instance, Ellis and Symons (1990).
8. Friday has continued her work in this area over a series of books – including *Women on Top* (Friday 1993), which pointed to changes in the nature of women's fantasies over a generation; and *Beyond My Control* (Friday 2009), which presents an outright celebration of women's wildest orgiastic fantasies. For more recent work with the same orientation, see Boss and Maltz (2008).
9. A recent American study raised the bar even higher with evidence that as many as 62% of women had experienced rape fantasies (see Bivona and Critelli 2009).
10. This research received funding support for its technical operations from Sunderland University, to whom we offer our thanks.
11. A recent study of people's motives for using Twitter put this point well: 'While we can neither quantify … nor account for all …, the responses we received provide valuable insight …' (Marwick and boyd 2010, 5).
12. Language is indeed key here. Recent work in psychology has recast 'fantasy' as 'counter-factual thinking' – that is, the ability to think the world in ways that transcend how it is currently being experienced. Interesting work is being done on the benefits for people with high counter-factual thinking in, for instance, handling stress, and the disadvantages for low counter-factual thinking individuals when unpredictable events occur. See, for instance, Bacon, Walsh, and Martin (2013).
13. It is tempting to propose a relationship between Chivers' findings and those of a curious study of differences in the nature of male and female sexual fantasies, carried out (inevitably) on American college students. McCauley and Swann (1978) investigated male and female reported fantasies during both heterosexual sex and during masturbation. They summarize what they see as a clear emergent pattern: 'Males are thinking more about sexual activities they are experiencing or have experienced, while females are thinking more about sexual activities they have never experienced' (1978, 76).
14. It would be misleading to see this as specifically American, even if it is strongest there. A UK *Guardian* feature on Chivers' research could not resist constructing alternative Just-so stories to the standard socio-biological explanations of 'female purity' and 'male lust' (Williams 2013).

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