
Sexual Fantasy and Adult Attunement

Differentiating Preying from Playing



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The author looks at the psychology of sexuality and its origins in the brain's cortex. She discusses how the cues for desire sometimes overshadow mere physiological cues and how they may be healthy or unhealthy. She argues that understanding the intricate neurochemical and neurostructural workings of the mind and the central and autonomic nervous systems in both men and women—and their dependence on early attunement—helps therapists and patients distinguish sexual play from predatory, trauma-inducing sexual aggression and that this distinction is crucial given the centrality of the mammalian emotional circuit of play in our brain processes, including the sexual. She discusses the dangers of mistaking forcible rape fantasy for a real-life desire and examines other fantasies and the sexual role play that fuel our sexuality. She warns of the psychological and emotional damages of isolating, nonconsensual sex. And she discusses how sexual play can provide emotional attunement, joy, and sociability to human life. **Key words:** sexual fantasy; sexual play; reward center

UNLIKE OTHER ANIMALS, human beings engage in sex for numerous reasons apart from procreation. They do so because, first, the availability of the human female for intercourse does not depend on an evident estrus—no mating season schedules her sexual readiness. Second, sexual cues for both males and females are largely symbolic—cultural (linguistic, artistic, or mythic) rather than physiological (Foote 1954). Individuals long for sexual experiences for their own sake—as consensual, creative, novel, stimulating yet relaxing play—without calculating the consequences. So “conceptualizing sex as fun can hardly be called the invention of immoralists; it is everyman’s discovery” (159). The intricate cortex of the human brain enables complex symbolic thought, allowing for euphoric recall of past sexual encounters and for the fantasy of future experiences, thus allowing us to invoke sexual desire through mere imagination. And there lies the rub: How do therapists recognize, and help patients recognize, which fantasies

enrich sexual expression with healthy play and which prey on others—or on the self—by perpetrating and perpetuating old traumas?

Indeed, our culture seems sexually saturated in a novel, curiously unplayful way. Pornography—the ultimate prescribed, predictable goad to isolated lust—often takes center stage. Bereft of the spontaneous, real-time play so crucial to healthy sexual (and other) development and enjoyment, porn-based sex (like trauma-conditioned sex) can be robotic, disembodied, and dissociative. It becomes a body-based affect disconnected from the self and, therefore, from a partner—hardly a portal to the erotic. Genuine play, on the other hand, engages us in enriched emotional, psychological, and neurobiological levels simultaneously, and our unrehearsed responses to sexual play unite our mind, brain, and body for optimal satisfaction. Some basic neurophysiology clarifies how this occurs.

Brain Mechanisms in Sex

For both genders, the brain proves equally central for sex, even if the neurological rules of the game differ for each. Male sexual arousal depends heavily on salience, on the prominence for males of what they see, which registers in the insular cortex deep within the temporal and frontal lobes. Neuroscientists think this structure is responsible for how humans experience the self, the sense of boundary between “me” and “other.” The theory of embodied cognition posits that our thoughts cannot be separated from emotions and that emotions impact the body. So when we have an emotion-laden experience, the insula detects that feeling in the body, bringing it into conscious awareness. The somatosensory cortex, the area of the brain that receives and processes information about the body, turns touch sensation into sexual arousal. This area curls, horseshoe-like, around the brain, processing data from all parts of the body.

When a touch receptor for sexual arousal (a Meissner’s corpuscle in the genitalia) is stimulated, it sends electrical impulses along a nerve fiber to the spinal cord. Data then continue up to the brain through the thalamus to the somatosensory cortex. There, data are translated into touch perception (Carter 2009). When the insular and somatosensory cortices—and the right and left amygdala—significantly deactivate during penile stimulation signaling emotional and environmental safety, men discard the anxiety that can inhibit their sexual performance (Georgiadis and Holstege 2005).

More a nucleus rather than an obvious structure, the amygdala is located deep in the limbic area of the temporal lobe and is considered the main sensor of emotion, specifically of threat and loss (Carter 2009). In males, its right side appears to activate when stimulated, and the medial preoptic nucleus of the hypothalamus—larger in males and crucial for male sexual arousal—is the epicenter of male sexual urges (Carter 2009; Panksepp and Biven 2012).

But vive la difference! In females the anterior commissure—a primitive structure tying the two hemispheres and linking unconscious with conscious material—is larger than in males. This dimorphism may explain why females seem more emotionally aware and more skilled at verbalizing emotions. A woman's left brain (the analytical side) is more extensively connected to her emotional right brain than a man's, so to enjoy sex, she not only has to feel safe emotionally (with her right amygdala) but also has to know she is safe cognitively (with her left amygdala).

In addition, females have a more complex and circuitous arousal pattern. Beginning in the ventromedial hypothalamus (VMH), a woman's sexual readiness is primarily controlled by estrogen and progesterone and so depends on her menstrual cycle. These neural hormones do double duty by preparing her to be emotionally receptive and trusting of her mate: The estrogen ignites oxytocin genes in neurons within the hypothalamus, elevating production of the brain chemical oxytocin. And when estrogen combines with progesterone, the oxytocin receptor fields in the VMH flourish dramatically, signaling the reflexive posture of lordosis—the arching of the back—via intricate circuitry in the spinal cord (Panksepp and Biven 2012). Mental and emotional readiness, coupled with a sexually receptive body posture, signals her mate that she's sexually available.

Not only women's neurological means, but even their aims appear more subtle than men's. They seek connection and pleasure rather than the specific end point of orgasm (Basson 2000; Bianchi-Demicheli and Ortigue 2007), though they do report more overall sexual satisfaction if they experience orgasm than if they do not (Kontula and Miettinen 2016). During high sexual arousal, a woman's left amygdala is calmed, dispelling anxiety, and her left lateral orbitofrontal cortex, responsible for conscious emotions, seems to decrease in blood flow, indicating its disinhibition to allow bodily pleasure and joyful sex. Precisely, this lessening of stress and of rational control allows orgasm (Bianchi-Demicheli and Ortigue 2007; Georgiadis et al. 2006), just as deactivation of the left and right amygdala favors performance in men.

If individual orgasm in either sex requires a lessening of anxiety, consensual sex (like any play) needs all participants to experience such lowered stress, usually by being rested, well fed, and safe. And as we will see, the free reign of play, in turn, facilitates erotic states.

Centrality of Play in the Brain and in Sex

Decades of animal research (Panksepp 1998) reveal that the same seven affective systems (i.e., the brain circuits allowing emotions) originate in the lower brain stem of all mammals, linking our neurochemistry and neuroarchitecture to those of even our most distant animal relatives (Panksepp 1998; Panksepp and Biven 2012). These fundamental emotional circuits—SEEKING, RAGE, FEAR, LUST (or conscious sexual desire), CARE, PANIC (or GRIEF), and PLAY—are present at birth and combine to produce all feelings: care and play blend, for example, to allow nurturing. So the ability and urge to play exists in all mammals as a basic motivational circuit in the primitive brain (Panksepp 1998). As such, the play circuit forms part of our central nervous system, making play both voluntary (as in “Let’s play!”) and autonomic (as in spontaneous laughter, tickling, dancing, and cavorting). In either case, play raises us from the mundane to greater joy and awareness (Gordon 2009).

Many find it difficult to define play, but neuroscientists generally agree on its five essential qualities: Play has adaptive functions; it is spontaneous; it is exaggerated (differs obviously from ordinary behavior); it is repeatable but variable; and it can occur only when all parties are free of overwhelming physical and mental stress (Panksepp and Biven 2012).

Researchers often call the seeking circuit the “brain reward system” (Olds and Milner 1954; Green & Ostrander, 2009) because it activates approach behaviors. We seek what we desire with anticipation, euphoria, and excitement, nowhere more evidently than when we target a delectable meal or a sexual liaison. The exuberant anticipation and accompanying euphoria of sex (or of leaving on a vacation, for that matter) further dramatizes the experience in our minds. Seeking is driven by curiosity and dopamine, and it intensifies our engagement with our environment. And, for better or worse, when it comes to sex, the prolific connections of emotion to the frontal cortex let human beings imagine minute strategies for precisely how and when they want it to play out.

Thus the brain's lust and play circuits may have evolved out of its seeking circuit as a function of social bonding. For example, juvenile playfulness may engender later courtship and copulatory skills, thus conveying an evolutionary advantage. But however we understand its origin, play proves crucial to healthy sexuality by linking anticipation, euphoria, and the novelties of sexual activity to the brain's dopaminergic reward circuitry (Panksepp and Biven 2012).

Sex *per se* is activated by the seeking and lust circuits but commences in the hypothalamus, which itself needs dopamine to move into action. The meso-limbic dopamine center dwells in the ventral tegmental area, where the nucleus accumbens (NAc)—the heart of the reward center—lies. And the very center of the NAc links directly to motor functions, making it ground zero for producing the motivation to acquire rewards, whether from sex or play. When individuals feel safe and relaxed, their play circuits can be activated. Then the physiologically neighboring and abundantly connected lust circuits naturally turn on, especially when the possibility of sex beckons. This brain-chemical nexus makes sex share the effects of true play, opening their symbol-oriented imaginations and thereby sharpening their problem-solving skills. And play allows for “a state of merged awareness and action” between individuals (Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett 1971, 46), again bolstering their social ties.

Homeostatic affects (like hunger and thirst) and sensory ones (such as taste or touch) lead to satiating behaviors that return us to homeostasis. By contrast, emotional affects are accompanied by emotional behaviors. And among the emotions, lust ranks as the most complex, because all three types of affect—homeostatic, sensory, and emotional—have been present for the sexual arousal to engage. In homeostasis, hormonal release from the testes or ovaries, adrenal, and pituitary glands ready the individual for sex. Massive state changes in sympathetic arousal and a host of neurochemicals to induce muscular changes ready an individual for sex. Sexual thoughts, images, and emotions further drive the seeking system into action. Somatosensory powers of touch, smell, and play evoke sexual preference and arousal. Indeed, some mammals require pheromones to activate olfaction, but all mammals require provocative skin contact prior to sexual contact, making lust also behave like a sensory affect.

Perhaps most obvious in humans, an array of playful activities—kissing, hugging, tickling, caressing, visual and, finally, genital stimulation—precedes sex, making sex a subset of play. Even more than the socio-emotional systems of care, panic and grief, and play, lust is highly regulated by bodily feelings and

considered “probably one of the most sensorially and homeostatically well-connected emotional systems, more so than RAGE and FEAR” (Panksepp and Biven 2012, 265). Because the entire body and the emotions must be ready for action in courting and copulation, lust is considered an emotional-affective brain process.

The Human Art of Eroticism

In his evocative book, *The Erotic Mind*, Morin (1995) defines eroticism as the innate capacity for arousal that is then environmentally shaped—“the process through which sex becomes meaningful, . . . inherently complex, and unpredictable” (3–6). That is, the erotic sense is inextricably bound up with all the instincts, capacities, expectations, anxieties, and ideals that cultivate the self. I define eroticism as the deliberate seeking of pleasure through the skilled use of higher-ordered mentation (see also Schnarch 1991)—a distinctly human aim because of the unique ability of the human prefrontal cortex to recall past sexual enjoyment and then to imagine infinite permutations. These numberless mental depictions, which may include fantasies an individual never wants actually to experience, make human sexuality not just a natural function (and certainly not a rote one), but one intricately laden with individual and cultural significance, fears, intentions, values, and guilts that can either impede or wildly ignite sexual desires.

The Delicate Equilibrium of Human Sexual Health

Humans should be the happiest creatures on earth, since their prodigious brains foment endless sexual fantasies, from idyllic dalliance with a beloved to the control dynamics of forcible sex. But despite the infinity of these imaginings, healthy, enjoyable, consensual sex eludes many of those whose lustful inclinations (self-states) have been split off by trauma in childhood or adolescence. When low self-esteem caused by trauma mixes with high arousal, it can produce a dangerous cocktail that leads to predation and self-destruction. Helping patients distinguish the trauma-fed unhealthiness of humiliation of—or sexual violence to—themselves or others from the intriguing, play-motivated pull of forcible sex fantasies and detoxing it is a therapeutic art.

Sexual Fantasy

Sexual desire is always present in humans—sometimes all the more so when they attempt to suppress it. This paradox leads individuals to engage in some types of sexual fantasy to overcome the kind of guilt about sexual feelings (Bader 2002) that constrains them from exploring their sensual limits. Sexual fantasies are daydreams—a kind of play that lets individuals travel the erotic universe, unfettered by internal or social restrictions. Fantasies allow humans playfully to entertain and, sometimes, playfully to experience sexual scenarios without consequence because (imaginary) other players are in control, or individuals are in control only in their own minds but not in their actual behavior, leaving them blameless either way. So fantasies “play highly symbolic roles in counteracting certain psychological forces that hold back desire” (30). In sum, the function even of edgy fantasizing is a natural, and psychologically neutral, mental power.

Rape Fantasy and Women

The relatively short shrift women’s sexuality in general receives from science has begun to change. But rape fantasy—not desiring the horrible crime of rape but imagining it in playful reverie—among women merits singling out for discussion because of its still-controversial nature as well as its prevalence. For decades, researchers shied away from examining forcible sex fantasies out of fear that such study could reinforce the pernicious myth that women want to be forced to have sex and, thus, could condone actual male sexual aggression (Critelli and Bivona 2008). Although as early as 1953 sex investigators Alfred Kinsey and his colleagues warned that ignoring the topic sent shaming messages to women about their desires, psychoanalysts and some feminists persisted in mischaracterizing these playful fantasies as de facto masochistic and, therefore, pathological (Brownmiller 1975; Russell 1980). So even after more than fifty years of catch-up research, scholars have reached no consensus on the meaning or function of rape fantasy nor on the reasons for its frequent occurrence (Critelli and Bivona 2008). By refusing to acknowledge sex as play, and forcible sex fantasies as a playful, thrill-seeking element of human sexuality, researchers have invited this difficulty.

Recent studies have indicated that women comfortable with letting their imaginations (but not their actions) run wild are more prone to fantasies of forcible sex than are less erotically open women (Bivona and Crittelli 2008). A recent study in which two thirds of college-aged women reported having fre-

quent forced-sex fantasies, most commonly of being forced by a man to have sex, supports this finding. The most erotophilic (open to sexual fantasy) respondents reported more sexual arousal from their own fantasies, as well as from audio-recorded fantasies presented to them, than did less erotophilic women (Bivona, Critelli, and Clark 2012). Still, although more women have had fantasies of forced sex than any other types of fantasy and they report these fantasies as pleasurable and exciting (Kanin 1982), they do not use them as much as they do some other fantasies in masturbation or partnered sex (Critelli and Bivona 2008). What marks rape fantasy as a fantasy rather than a desire for actual rape is that the creator of the fantasy has complete governance over its contents. That is, authorial control itself appears to heighten sexual stimulation. Since women's erotic rape fantasies pointedly "involve the use of physical force, threat of force, or incapacitation" (58), if varying in intensity and type, most research concludes that the thought of the nonconsensuality of the sex, rather than the sex itself, arouses them.

Eight psychological theories about rape fantasy seem to compete with, yet actually complement, each other. Masochism (unconscious desire for pain, or at least for surrender and submission); sexual blame avoidance (repressed female escapes shame over, and thus can satisfy, her desires); openness to sexual experience; desirability (the woman's allurements drive the man to rape, in effect mastering him); male rape culture (assimilation of male-dominated culture); biological predisposition to surrender (females choose demonstrably fit males); sympathetic activation ("fight or flight" stress reaction ignites sexual arousal as a side effect); and adversary transformation (as in the romance novels in which virtuous but sexy heroines turn mean metaphoric frogs into devoted metaphoric princes). But all eight paradigms agree that the ideation of forcible sex activates sympathetic arousal of the autonomic nervous system in women—a necessary mechanism for sexual excitation. The literature suggests that moderate Sympathetic Nervous System (SNS) activation facilitates female sexual arousal. That is, moderate levels of SNS arousal yield maximal sexual performance: If SNS activation is too low, the body is not adequately primed for sex. If it is too high—as in an actual rape—SNS activation primes the body for protection by releasing cortisol and other protective systems and wholly extinguishing desire (Lorenz et al. 2012). Women's actual and reasonable fears of rape serve to induce—imaginatively and, in some, purposively—a powerful neuropsychobiological reaction to sensed danger, infusing the sexual scene with a massive physical and emotional charge similar to the delicious virtual fright we feel riding a roller coaster or watching a horror movie but not the trauma of real terror.

Thus, while the fantasized activities may be against the will of the scenario's "self-character," the fantasy itself attests to the will of the playwright for penetrative sex (Critelli and Bivona 2008). The fantasizer gives de facto, implicit consent to her rapist for an act that likely accords with gender rituals and prevailing expectations of male dominance and female submission (Fisher 1999). We will see that, for a host of neuropsychological, sociological, and cultural reasons, rape fantasies can (and seem meant to) add fillip to female sexual experiences that the fantasizer often perceives as humdrum.

Exploring the Range of Women's Fantasies

Some theorists believe that the more sexual experiences a female has had, the more likely she is to engage in sexual fantasy (Critelli and Bivona 2008). This stands to reason. Females appear to have less set sexual preferences than do males. For example, straight men viewing erotic images of females tend toward higher subjective and genital arousal than they do when viewing sexy images of men. Female arousal appears more flexible—a superior suppleness of desire leading some to consider females as inherently bisexual (Baumeister 2000; Chivers et al. 2004).

In the spring of 2016, I conducted a two-day workshop with eighteen Caucasian women ranging in age from late twenties to early sixties, during which they explored their sexual attitudes and concerns. Some had never married, others were divorced, and one of the oldest had been in a relationship for thirty-five years. Many reported having suffered through infidelity and either left the relationship or repaired it. All considered themselves open to receiving pleasure and to sexual experimentation, and all affirmed that they were desirous of better combining eroticism with deep love in a relationship. Asked to write, anonymously, their sexual fantasy on an index card, they produced a varied list.

- Sex with a beautiful woman who is connected and "open."
- A wild and raunchy threesome out in nature, with the risk of others seeing
- I am loved by two men I feel safe with who are completely focused on my pleasure. They massage me, give me oral sex, and make eye contact. I have intercourse while giving oral sex.
- I want him to hold me down and take animalistic control.

- Hot bath with him, rose petals in the bath, soft music, massage, feed each other fruit and chocolate, slowly make love.
- Role play: We are two strangers who meet at a bar, and hit it off. We go home together and enjoy exploring each other's bodies.
- *Shades of Grey*-style BDSM.
- Hours of massaging each other on top of a mountain in natural beauty, passionate sex, relinquishing control, giving over the power, trusting and heart-opening.
- Sex in a public place.
- Swinging (partner trading) with another trusted, sexy couple.
- A handyman fantasy—someone who takes care of broken things, somehow knows what I need, and gives it to me.
- There is music, a big bonfire, and lots of people dancing outside under the moon and enjoying an amazing celebration. I lock eyes with my sweetie and we steal away to some cozy room nearby. We know and love each other so deeply that there is no fumbling, no shyness. We fall into a deep, passionate connection, making love to the sounds of music and merriment.
- Being in a room with many attractive people and being able to do what I want with each while others are playing too.
- To embody the masculine role, wear a strap-on and make love to a female and give her tremendous pleasure. The turn-on would be bringing her pleasure and being a skillful lover.
- Being dominated, tied up, aggressively teased—denied orgasm.
- To be watched making love to the person I love.
- I used to want to get tied to the bedpost and let my lover kiss, stroke, lick, or touch me everywhere—vibrators and toys included. Now I see myself dancing sensually in front of my lover, losing myself and having him join me in sexual dance, the energy transcending into out-of-control primal sex, doing anything we want.

The list of fantasies surprised me because, despite their detail and emotional variance from demure to daring, they shared the common theme of the fantasy—creator's wielding ultimate control. Perhaps more interesting, the fanciful content specifically counteracted the tedium (Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett 1971) they had reported in their sex lives. The imaginings also exemplified most of the essential components of play (spontaneity, dramatic exaggeration, novelty,

and absence of shame). Confirming current studies, these erotic fantasies were sexually charged because they challenged and expanded individuals' self-images, transgressed societal norms, and took them out of everyday experiences.

Sexual Fantasy and Role Play as Forms of Relational Play

Regardless of gender or orientation, though, most individuals think sexual desire is more passionate within an intimate relationship. Some see this as true and some as a mere truism. But the paradox untangles thus: Even in the tenderest romance, the relational aspect of great sex is only part of the equation. At the pinnacle of sexual want, we momentarily become selfish (Morin 1995) in pursuit of our own enjoyment. In effect, we temporarily use our partner without regard for his or her feelings. Bader (2002) finds such sexual "ruthlessness" a necessary ingredient for "unbridled pleasure" (33–34). Yet only a secure dyad built on sound emotional connection and mutuality can withstand even this transitory indifference. Thus, a dynamic tension between love and lust, between caring and callousness, alone ensures optimal sexual pleasure.

Playful Sexual Fantasy in the Relationship

This playful give-and-take, an equilibrium that dances between altruism and egoism, suggests that cultivating eroticism requires paying attention to one's evolving fantasies, sharing them with a partner, listening to the partner's imaginings with nonjudgmental curiosity, and noting each other's interest, arousal, revulsion, or all three. In a healthy relationship, discussing sexual fantasies freshens desire and helps both parties explore what sex means to the other (Katehakis 2010). As such, the journey parallels successful early development. The well-attuned infant-mother dyad shares states of pleasure and interest as they yield and mold to the cadence of one another's moods, deciphering nonverbal expressions and building trust and attachment. This paralinguistic, interactive, co-regulatory affective process, which privileges the amplification of play states, proves essential for developing self-regulation, cognition, and emotional self-knowledge in infants (Schore 1994, 2003a, 2003b). A mother's gaze activates subcortical dopamine-accelerating arousal states, such as joy, nourishing a primary intersubjectivity and other vitality affects (Schore 1994). When arousal levels become too high, the maternal urge and antistress features of oxytocin have her naturally down

regulate her infant, further increasing confidence and love between the two. Similarly, if more equally, an adult dyad mutually attunes to produce a sense of safety along with curiosity so that shared pleasure states emerge from the inter-subjective field cocreated from the subcortical resonance between them. When a couple can sustain friendship and stability at the micromoment subcortical speed with which one human being appraises and responds to another (Solomon and Tatkin 2011), their systems become primed for spontaneous play. Mutual gazing, flirting, and emotional seduction activate the seeking system and aim it towards an exuberant, connecting, and dopaminergic reward.

Shared fantasies invoke a play state between the couple, much like planning a fun vacation. Explicit conversations, the sexual excitation they bring, and the safety of imaginative agreement can quell shame and usher in wide-ranging consensual play. A jointly authored sexual narrative invites a couple to risk being seen in each other's emotional nakedness and vulnerability.

During sex, as in daydreaming, one's mind naturally wanders. When it leaves the present sexual experience and enters another erotic realm, a partner may be bidden into these private spaces. Undulation between the current sexual act and the fantasy can set up a multilayered neurobiological charge that heightens pleasure all around. Nonverbal signs of excitement (hard breathing, moaning, and gazing at each other), as well as explicit talk about sexual fantasy, increase arousal for both partners as these expressive novelties register in their brains.

Certainly, verbalizing sexual fantasies should not aim to hurt or exact revenge, which should be agreed prior to sex to avoid violating the spirit of playfulness. Speaking one's fantasies, instead, ought to remove guilt and recognize shared imaginary sex scenes as a form of play in the erotic—not the ordinary—world. As Stoller (1986) points out, pleasure can be released only when fantasy, that uniquely human construction, has effectively engaged the mind, the emotions, and the body.

If one partner is not dependent upon the other to validate his or her worth and lovability, he or she will not get angry, collapse into shame, or overreact to the fantasy the partner shares. The risks of directly talking about and listening to one another's hidden desires may truly invigorate the sex lives of both. Especially if both parties collaborate in their invention, they will increase the repertoire of their erotic styles together (Katehakis 2010).

Sexual Role Play in the Relationship

Along with the verbalization of fantasies, acting them out is a form of overt

sexual play that can bring erotic imaginings to life. As with sharing fantasy, role playing necessitates a readiness to admit to oneself what one finds sexually arousing, and we must add to that a trust in one's partner to execute it as sexual play. Both requirements themselves depend on the banishment of shame—the great impediment to sexual (and, perhaps, to all) enjoyment and an obstacle to play. Of course, one can pretend to be ashamed as part of the scene, but actual shame (usually hearkening back to unresolved childhood humiliation) blocks all play states, sexual or not.

But even freed of shame, partners engaging in role play need the ability to tolerate or negotiate each other's preferences. If a partner requests behaviors beyond an individual's limits, he or she must find a creative compromise that works for both. Solving such problems can become a pleasure in itself, turning disconnection and disorder into a mutually preferred future order (Horner 2006). For unlike fantasy, sexual role play is always communal and intentional—a game with rules making it a “limited spatio-temporal unit” and allowing participants to “abandon [themselves] to the process, acting without self-consciousness” (Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett 1971, 46).

Role play, like all consensual sex, should include elements of fun and improvisation. Describing one's ultimate turn-on or picking a theme allows a participant “to adopt a specific erotic persona . . . which is a specific sexual self you would be tapping” (Resnick 1997, 258). Some individuals find being looked at in various roles—facilitated by wardrobe changes—highly erotic. Like children playing an imaginative game or improvisational actors on a stage, sexual role play requires that both parties always respond in the affirmative to an evolving, moment-to-moment connection with each other's changing desires and seductive moves. Laughter, giggling, and ad-libbing let the right-brain, body-based states of freedom blossom while quieting the censorious and deflating left-brain burdens of day-to-day life. Love may be sexy, but combining love with the (literally) single-minded, if brief, pursuit of private pleasure demands that lovers hold tightly to their emotional link—attuning their thoughts and desires even as they experiment with the polarized roles of submission and domination, wade into the waters of cross-dressing, or engage in (or fantasize about) group sex.

Unhealthy Versus Healthy Sexual Fantasy and Role Play

We have seen that healthy sex is consensual and interactive, that it facilitates unscripted, co-creative play, but that unhealthy sex is isolated, isolating, and pornographic in its scripted, detached, and unspontaneous nature. Similarly,

sexualized locker-room talk is not play, but a form of predation that—even if temporary or in fun—objectifies another individual without consent. It is a means to the speaker’s private end. Without consent, playing is preying, because the other is being duped, coerced, victimized, and used. As Marks-Tarlow accurately points out elsewhere in this issue in “I Am an Avatar of Myself: Fantasy, Trauma, and Self-Deception,” “volunteerism is the hallmark of true play.” Marks-Tarlow further clarifies the distinction between predation and play in her case study. Although “Jen” appears to be playing with her brother “Zev,” his highly-scripted, predatory, criminal molestation of her is anything but play. To survive her childhood, Jen had to succumb to Zev’s assaults and to deceive herself that she was “going along to get along.”

Such internalized coercion plays out routinely in the exculpatory rationalization that expects women to accept the notion that “boys will be boys” and to ignore—often meaning to dissociate from—their own reality when verbally denigrated or sexually used without their explicit agreement. This argument serves to dissociate victims from their own reality, making it difficult for them to discern date rape and even more difficult for them to report it. The same kind of argument appears dramatically evident in some genres of pornography that harass and degrade women (Mulac, Jansma, and Linz 2002) while depicting them as consenting. And we sometimes hear echoes of this menacing rationale in popular music. In real life, mutual and consensual sadomasochism (S&M) is a freely entered exchange of pain between competent adults with reciprocal and agreed-to rules of engagement. But some radical S&M-genre pornography obviates any bargaining or consent from female actors. Yet it has them appear to enjoy a level of pain and humiliation virtually everyone would find intolerable, rendering their lack of true consent obvious (Bridges et al. 2010)—more like a snuff film than one portraying genuine S&M practices. Again, to vitiate the voluntary is to frustrate play and alienate the player.

In Stoller’s study on perversions (1986), he found that adult sexual excitement from behaviors that risked harm to oneself or another derived from unresolved childhood trauma. He believed that the anticipation of danger experienced by those who participate in these acts comes not as “voluptuous sensations so much as a rapid vibration between fear of trauma and hope of triumph” (105). In such cases, fantasy cannot bring a sense of mastery over or resolution of the original hurt since it, instead, aims to exact revenge for it by elevating the “victim to victor” (Stoller 1986, 106). In perversion, Stoller argued, the positions of prey and perpetrator are reversed because the former target writes the

script and dictates all the roles (however rigidly predictable these are). This, he thought, makes perversion “one more masterpiece of the human intellect” (106). Reflecting the survivor’s childhood experience of nonentity, perversion employs one-person fantasy to deprive a new victim of the intersubjectivity of healthy human connection.

Not its content, then, but its unwavering ritualization, unconscious rage, and absolute isolation sharply distinguish preying from playing. Trauma must be healed before it can be mastered, finally allowing its practice as a free desire instead of a habitual, compulsive subcortical drive. Poignantly, then, the truest test of the health of any sexual play includes not just the conscious consent of the other, but of the self.

Fantasies that Harm the Relationship

Whatever a couple’s bent, sexual fantasies can break or bond the relationship. When one party has been sexually traumatized and has not resolved that trauma, reenacting it in a sexual context, without explicit conversation and “safe words” (such as “stop” meaning stop), unconscious perceptions and habituated floods of brain chemicals may cause retraumatization. This conforming to another’s pathogenic beliefs will almost always create sexual inhibition and dysfunction (Bader 2002). As a result, intersubjectivity collapses between the duo, so novelty and play get quashed.

If one partner fantasizes in silence about someone else during sex with the other not privy to it, implicit nonverbal processes telegraph emotional abuse, abandonment, or disinterest. Both parties remain in their metaphoric separate corners—the auto-regulatory vacuum of a one-person system. Neurobiologically, and therefore psychologically, each individual in the couple—fantasizer and partner—feels lonely, unconnected, and sexually used. Unconscious perception and brain chemistry prove powerfully destructive agents, indeed.

Fantasies that Help the Relationship

If partners can enunciate their pathogenic beliefs about themselves or their partner (“I don’t feel lovable,” or “You seem to feel undeserving of pleasure”), they can disprove and counteract them. Dismantling harmful self-concepts by airing them invites good brain—and therefore, sexual—chemistry (Bader 2012). When sexual fantasies are co-constructed, they allow an array of sexual happenings to occur without ever leaving the bedroom or going outside the couple. The novelty of untested possibility and shattered taboo, experienced in a safe

container, can turn anticipatory anxiety into a sense of orgasmic freedom and make sex seem explosive (Stoller 1986). Revealing the most vulnerable parts of the self to the other requires tolerance for risk and for being seen and known more deeply than in any other context. Exploring the darkest recesses of our body or mind or psyche allows previously unknown or disowned self-states out of the shadows. This revelatory process of attunement illuminates and even creates unfamiliar aspects of the self, birthing us anew and delivering us into the safe body or mind or psyche of our partner. Only through the unique dyad can we discover for each other—and present to one another—the emergent parts of our self. This daring, spontaneous, coauthored play can make sex a further developmental process in mature growth, especially “when heart and genitals reach orgasm together” (Resnick 1997, 252).

Whatever internal conflicts we have will surely show up in our sex lives, so self-actualization remains the first step towards playful sex. But let us not forget the neurochemical wash and physiological arousal mixing together in both genders to create the intoxicating reward we experience as orgasm. Intense sexual pleasure taps into the autonomic nervous system’s bliss states since touch turns off the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis (HPA)—the primary stress-regulating system in the body. And, produced by the brain, noradrenaline and the bonding neurotransmitters oxytocin and prolactin increase in the bloodstream and cerebrospinal fluid during orgasm (Exton et al. 1999), encouraging pair bonding (Coria-Avila et al. 2016), and deeper attunement. Thus, the thrill of orgasm functions as an evolutionary mechanism promoting reproduction and favoring the longer-term reproductive adaptation of stable child rearing. In human life, imaginative, intersubjective sexual play and the orgasm it enhances—besides being fun—signal and cement our devotion to another person (Fleischman 2016) through feelings of closeness, harmony, and joy. Thus, they structure our families and support our cooperative sociability.

Conclusion

The essential emotional circuit of play, present in all mammalian brains and linked in ours to sociability and to sexuality, functions as a lynchpin for both. Play confers the evolutionary advantages of human connectivity and communication. It also fires up the drive for private pleasure and eternal novelty. Like every human power, play bends to personal and communal pressures and ideals,

and so it may work for good or ill. Fantasies imagined or acted out—like play in general—can support both isolated imagery and interactions and may harm or help relationships.

As therapists assess the health or illness of their patients' sexual practices, they should center their considerations on the effects of these practices on themselves and on others. Sexual actions and imagery that constantly function as a one-person system, isolated and isolating, formulaic, and nonconsensual, are clearly predatory; indeed, they likely repeat, with wishful editing, unresolved inner trauma. True play, whether fantasy or role playing, sparkling with creativity and shared with a trusted, willing, creative partner, treasures and expands self-discovery and relationships. And that is the way to have fun.

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