From Fantasy to Reality:
Investigating the Effect of Mental Contrasting on the Intention, Commitment, and Likelihood of Enacting a Sexual Fantasy

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• “Almost any mental imagery that is sexually arousing...to the individual” (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995, p. 470)

• Normal aspect of human sexuality
  - 75-95% of men and women (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995)
  - can include many themes (Wilson, 1988)
  - content often reflects personal needs/goals (Birnbaum et al., 2012)
  - indicative of sexual & relationship satisfaction (Cado & Leitenberg, 1990)

• A ‘blueprint’ for sexual behaviour (Pithers et al., 1988; Ward & Hudson, 2000)

• However, empirical evidence is purely correlational (Bartels et al., in prep)
Fantasy Realisation Theory (FRT)

• Over 20 years of research (Oettingen, 2000, 2012, 2016)

− People often immerse themselves in ‘fantasies’ about a desired future.
− Merely fantasising about a desired future leads to **less effort** and **less success** in actually realising it (Kappes & Oettingen, 2012)

• However, when complemented with a clear sense of reality, people become more energised to realise their fantasy (Oettingen et al. 2001)

• Led to FRT – which identifies 3 modes of self-regulatory thought
Ignores possible obstacles. People feel and behave as though they have already attained that future, thus, reducing the necessity to act.

- Does not give direction of where to go. Thus, behaviour stays unchanged and independent of a one’s expectation of success.

Fantasising allows the desired future to be mentally experienced, giving action direction. Identifying & imagining the obstacle reveals if and how the obstacle can be overcome, providing the motivation to act (or not act if deemed unfeasible).

Indulging

Dwelling

Mental Contrasting (MC)
Beneficial Uses of FRT

• Losing weight (Johannessen, Oettingen, & Mayer, 2012)

• Reducing smoking (Oettingen, Mayer, & Thorpe, 2010)

• Increasing relationship satisfaction (Houssais et al., 2013)

• Exercise & healthy eating in diabetic patients (Adriaanse et al. 2013)

• Increasing goal attainment in people with depression (Fritzsche et al., 2016)

• Increased academic performance in children at risk of ADHD (Gawrilow et al., 2013)
Aim of Present Study

• Draw upon Oettingen’s research (Oettingen, 2000; Oettingen et al., 2001) to:

- Provide initial evidence that MC can be applied to sexual fantasies

- That is, will MC affect participants’ intention, commitment, and/or likelihood to act upon their sexual fantasy?
Method

Design:
• Experimental study conducted in two parts (2 weeks apart)

Participants:
• Recruited via university’s participation system and posters around campus
• Initial sample of 123 participants aged 18-40 ($M_{\text{age}} = 22; SD = 3.51$)
• Males = 42%; Females = 58%
Procedure & Materials (Part 1)

- Held in the university labs:

  1) Chose a SF that had not enacted
  2) Mentally envisioned for 1 min
  3) Reported level of arousal towards it

Question responded to on a 5-point scale (Oettingen et al., 2001)

Wrote down four positive aspects & four obstacles related to the SF they envisioned
Procedure *(Part 1)* cont’d

- Each participant was then randomly assigned to 1 of 3 conditions:

**Fantasy-only (FO)**
Focused only on the *positive aspects* of their fantasy that they previously reported.

**Reality-only (RO)**
Focused solely on the previously reported *obstacles* that prevent the enactment of their sexual fantasy.

**Mental Contrasting (MC)**
Juxtaposing positive aspects of their sexual fantasy with the obstacles preventing its enactment.
Procedure (Part 1) cont’d

• All completed the Wilson Sex Fantasy Questionnaire (WSFQ; Wilson, 1978)
• Given an Interim Debrief Form

Procedure (Part 2) - Qualtrics link emailed exactly 2 weeks later.

• Asked whether they engaged in the sexual fantasy from Part 1.
• Commitment, Intention, and Likelihood of engaging in the sexual fantasy was then assessed (dependent variables)
• Finally, thanked and shown a Final Debrief Form.

• 96 participants completed Part 2 (attrition rate of 21.95 %)
Unrealistic / Impossible Fantasies

- The content of sexual fantasies can involve:
  - “anything one likes, however unrealistic” (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995, p.469).

- “Fantasies may come in the form of...thoughts depicting actions and events that violate natural laws or social norms... However, people most frequently fantasise about not yet realised but principally possible futures” (Oettingen, 2012, p.3)

- Thus, we removed participants with fantasies that seemed impossible to enact.
  - 73% agreement on those deemed ‘unrealistic’ (disagreements discussed and finalised)

This resulted in a final sample of $N = 70$
## Results: ANCOVA

Conducted **2** (Condition: Experimental vs Other) × **2** (Expectation of Success: High vs Low) ANCOVAs on each DV, with total WSFQ score (frequency of sexual fantasising) as a covariate.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Likelihood</th>
<th>Commitment</th>
<th>Intention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Main effect of Condition;</strong></td>
<td><strong>Main effect of Condition;</strong></td>
<td><strong>Main effect of Condition;</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F(1,65) = 0.14, p = .71$</td>
<td>$F(1,65) = 0.04, p = .84$</td>
<td>$F(1, 65) = 1.69, p = .19.$</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Main effect of</strong></td>
<td><strong>Main effect of</strong></td>
<td><strong>Main effect of</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectation of Success;</td>
<td>Expectation of Success;</td>
<td>Expectation of Success;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F(1, 65) = 6.03, p = .017$</td>
<td>$F(1, 65) = 3.12, p = .08$</td>
<td>$F(1, 65) = 10.42, p = .002$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interaction effect;</strong></td>
<td><strong>Interaction effect;</strong></td>
<td><strong>Interaction effect;</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$F(1,65) = 0.029, p = .87$</td>
<td>$F(1,65) = 0.197, p = .67$</td>
<td>$F(1,65) = 5.07, p = .028$</td>
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*Note: All interactions non-significant when including all 96 participants (i.e., those with unrealistic sexual fantasies)*
Results: Simple Main Effects for ‘Intention’

Mean Intention scores

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>High ES</th>
<th>Low ES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MC</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
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</table>

$p = .001$

$p = .026$
“Energization will occur only when chances of success are high; when achievability looks bleak, mental contrasting leads to actively letting go of the unfeasible wish” (Oettingen & Reininger, 2016, p.4)
Themes identified in all participants’ responses to questions regarding the obstacles (top image) and positive aspects (bottom image) of their sexual fantasy.

**Theme Analysis**
Limitations

• Sample

• Two week window

• The word ‘fantasy’ can be problematic
  - elaborate scenarios beyond a specific sexual behaviour
  - sometimes contained objects of desire (a person) rather than a behavior

• Only found an effect for ‘Intention’ to engage in a sexual fantasy
Discussion: Academic Implications

Can help provide a deeper understanding of how (and why) some sexual fantasies are translated into behaviour.

Four pre-conditions to abuse (Finkelhor, 1984)

Sex with a child

Thoughts

MOTIVATION
‘Wanting to’

INTERNAL INHIBITORS
‘Conscience’

EXTERNAL INHIBITORS
‘Access to children’

OVERCOME VICTIM RESISTANCE
‘Doing it and getting away with it’

Fantasy of desired future

Obstacles of present reality

Sexual Offence
Dr Zhana Vrangalova: - Sex researcher and psychologist

Why is Fantasy so Important in the Bedroom?

We tend to have a narrow view of fantasy, in terms of when it is incorporated into our sex lives. Specifically, much view fantasy as something that is strictly a solo daydream, or that it is a special or kinky thing we do with our partner when we dress up or engage in role playing.

Really, fantasy is part of nearly every sexual encounter, from sending flirty sexts before the sex actually happens to the different power dynamics we adopt in bed with our partner that may not exist in our regular everyday relationship.

Renowned sex educator, Dr. Ian Kerner, adds, “Fantasy is the fast-track to amplifying arousal and enhancing orgasm. The brain is the biggest sex organ and men and women have the power to virtually think their way to orgasm. Unfortunately, couples don’t always develop their sexual imaginations together, so finding ways to stimulate fantasy together is essential.”

Dr. Zhana, sex educator and researcher, says “Fantasy allows our brains to play out different scenarios, safely experimenting with different sexual experiences and creating ideal encounters. It helps us decide what we really want to try in the bedroom and what we might want to keep as a fantasy alone. Many people, women especially, find that fantasizing during sex helps them enhance mental, and therefore physical, stimulation needed to reach orgasm. A sexy thought can lead to a
Discussion: Implications for Practice

Sex and relationship therapy

• Clients often encouraged “to ‘spice thing up’ by...acting out sexual fantasies” (Tabatabaie, 2014, p.16)

• “Acting out a sexual fantasy with your partner can help break down barriers and lead to a revival of sexual excitement” – Michael Krychman, Sexual medicine clinician

• Research shows that acting out sexual fantasies is linked to:
  - higher sexual satisfaction (Anderson, 2011)
  - frequent orgasms in women (Frederick et al., 2017)
Thank you.

Any questions?

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