

Cognitive synergies in erotic fantasies

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Abstract – In this article, Loonis (1999, 2001a)'s work on the structure of erotic fantasies are explored in the light of Apter (1982b, 1984)'s and Coulson (1991, 2001)'s analysis of what Apter calls “cognitive synergies.” After a brief presentation of Loonis' works, on the one hand, and Apter and Coulson's, on the other hand, the article presents an empirical exploratory analysis of 30 erotic fantasies, intended to disclose the cognitive synergies that are embedded in them. The conclusion is that many synergies are indeed associated with erotic fantasies in order to amplify their sexual arousal effects. These results have interesting implications for both prevention and therapy in sexual delinquency.

Keywords. cognitive synergy, erotic fantasy, reversal theory, structure, sexual delinquency.

Synergies cognitives dans les fantasmes érotiques

Résumé – Dans cet article, les travaux de Loonis (1999, 2001a) sur les structures des fantasmes érotiques sont explorées à la lumière des analyses d'Apter (1982b, 1984) et de Coulson (1991, 2001), à propos de ce qu'Apter appelle les « synergies cognitives ». Après une brève présentation des travaux de Loonis, d'une part, et d'Apter et Coulson, d'autre part, l'article présente une analyse empirique exploratoire de 30 fantasmes érotiques, dans l'intention de découvrir les synergies cognitives qui y sont présentes. La conclusion est que de nombreuses synergies sont effectivement associées avec les fantasmes érotiques afin d'amplifier leurs effets d'activation sexuelle. Ces résultats ont des implications intéressantes, à la fois pour la prévention et la thérapie de la délinquance sexuelle.

Mots-clés. Synergie cognitive, Fantasme érotique, Théorie du renversement, Structure, Délinquance sexuelle.

Introduction

Loonis (1999, 2001a)'s work on the structure of erotic fantasies clarified several elements in the organization of these imaginary experiences, and helps to explain the hedonic function of this type of fantasy, its addictive use, and the consequences of such uses in the risk of sexual delinquency (Brittain, 1967; Edges, 1983; MacCulloch and Al, 1983; Prentky et al., 1989; Coleman, 1992; Brown, 1997; Gresswell & Hollin, 1997). At the same time, Apter's Reversal Theory (Apter, 1982a, 1989, 2001), introduces the concept of “cognitive synergy” as a structure of the thought which is found in art (Apter, 1984), humor (Apter, Smith, 1977), entertainment (Coulson, 1991, 2001), religion (Foster, 1988), and metaphors (Apter, 1982b). Loonis (1999), in the

conclusion of his article on the structural approach of erotic fantasies, described his study only as a first attempt and suggested that other interesting structures could be discovered. A new analysis of fantasies was carried out in order to discover if cognitive synergies were indeed present and whether they contributed to the motivational impact of these fantasies. After a review of Loonis' results and a short presentation of Apter's concept of cognitive synergy, the main part of the article will consist of a presentation of this analysis of cognitive synergies in erotic fantasies.

The structure of erotic fantasies

From the fantasy material brought to light during psychotherapy with 29 nonperverse adults, 25 erotic fantasies were analyzed in an empirical way, intending to identify structural recurrences. Erotic fantasies, which can be equally named "sexual" or even "pornographic," are very common, and start to be created during adolescence (and sometimes earlier). They are initially used as an exciting support for the practice of masturbation, then later for sexual play between adults (Crépault, Couture, 1980; Crépault et al., 1977). For this reason, erotic fantasies are not only an intimate source of sexual arousal, always available, but they fulfill also a significant function in psychosexual development (the integration of the other in auto-eroticism, Œdipian conflict resolution, the construction of sexual identity, and the development of sexual skills).

The structures discovered by Loonis (1999, 2001a), can be grouped into four classes: Temporal structures, logical structures, role structures, and thematic structures.

(1) **Temporal structures** include three phases: (a) the *build-up phase* (where the individual specifies for him/herself the situation, the context, the characters, their balance of power, their roles and states); (b) the *action phase* during which an erotic history proceeds, in the form of a scenario (Stoller, 1979, 1985). During this action phase a rhythmic structure appears (an "onanorhythm", which seems particularly related to masturbatory practice) and which consists in the repetition of the same scene of the fantasy. This repetition moreover is marked by the evolution in *crescendo* of one element of the scene or of the action (like progressive stripping, introduction of new characters, etc). (c) the *final phase* of the fantasy which comprises two substructures that fit into each other: the *final "triggering" phase* (a complete transformation of the fantasy contents, like the inversion of the roles between the characters, the sudden changes of contexts, intended to trigger the orgasm), and the final phase named "*de-fantasizing*", with a departure from the transgressive, extreme, morally unusual characteristics of the fantasy and a return of psychic censure.

(2) **Logic structures** represent thematic or contextual elements of the fantasy, which are organized according to a more or less complex pattern. Loonis identified three types of logical structures: (a) the "*vertical fractal*" which consists of the repetition of the same theme, at the beginning from an overall context, to more particular under-contexts; (b) the "*horizontal fractal*" where the thematic pattern will be repeated on a single contextual level, but at several points of application; (c) the "*contexts fitting into each other*" where different themes, attached to different contexts (different scenarios or alternatives from the same scenario) are included one in another.

(3) **Role structures** include, just as in fairy tales for children, canonical roles which are: (a) the *agency of desire* (the character who incites to sexuality); (b) the *agency of prohibition* (the character who opposes sexual desire and excitation); (c) the *agency of*

diversion (the character who pretends that things are normal, and that nothing sexual is occurring).

(4) **Thematic structures** include four broad themes which are found in the majority of erotic fantasies: (a) the *transgression* theme (to do something sexually prohibited, to reverse a taboo); (b) the *phallic exhibition* theme (from a psychoanalytic point of view – Devereux, 1983 – a very explicit exposition of the male or female, adult or child, sexual organs, in an advanced state of excitation); (c) the *constraint* theme (the desire dominates the prohibition or the reverse); and (d) the *humiliation* theme (an absurd mixture of sexual excitation and shame).

Cognitive synergies

Following Apter (1982b, 1984) and Coulson (2001), cognitive synergies relate to the experience of identity, such as particular people, objects, places, events, situations, statements, or even oneself. Apter's definition is: Cognitive synergy occurs in experience when a given identity is seen to have opposite, mutually exclusive, or incompatible characteristics, either successively or simultaneously. In the *successive* version of cognitive synergy, the meaning of an identity switches to a mutually exclusive one (a famous perceptual example is the Necker cube). Whilst, the *simultaneous* version of synergy relates to contradictions that arise from different levels of interpretation, which may therefore be appreciated together (e.g. a landscape and not-a-landscape, i.e. a realistic painting).

Cognitive synergies may be categorized in two basic types: reversal and identity synergies. In *reversal synergy* the identity of an element will switch or reverse from one meaning to an opposing or mutually exclusive one (that is a successive synergy). The opposing properties therefore appear in succession but overlap for a short period as one meaning gives way to the other. This effect induces a feeling of paradox because of the momentary carrying over the meaning. In another way, *identity synergy* involve paradoxical sameness, when the identity is interpreted as being both one thing and another (a simultaneous synergy). In this case, the incompatible elements apply to the same identity throughout the experience. The major identity synergies involve various imaginary characteristics: reality and fantasy, make-believe.

The role of cognitive synergies in a psychology of motivation, as in Apter's Reversal Theory, is that firstly they induce a striking, dynamic phenomenological effect on the psychological state, feelings, emotions, and level of arousal of an individual. This effect is produced in two ways: (a) by increasing felt arousal, and (b) by enhancing the intensity with which the identity is experienced. The origin of this effect is based on a psychological conflict (which could imply some opposing processes in the nervous system).

Secondly, synergies stimulate certain characteristics of the metamotivational paratelic state (Apter, 1982), associated with sexual activity, like their puzzling qualities, the feelings of release from everyday logical thinking that their contradictions provide, and the intensification of contrast and quality of both elements in opposition. Synergies can also trigger a reversal to the paratelic state, which is a precondition to become involved in sexual activity. (The paratelic state is one in which the individual is concerned to enjoy things in the present moment rather than to do things for the sake of some future goal.) A great number of cognitive synergies are attached to the experience of paratelic

modes of thought, oriented towards the enjoyment of action at the present time, and in search of high levels of arousal (Apter, 1984).

Method

Thirty erotic fantasies are drawn from interviews with 34 nonperverse adults (18 people within the framework of a couple problem, 11 people in individual treatment for narcissistic or neurotic problems, and 5 control subjects recruited in a student population). The fantasies selected for their sufficient elaboration were transcribed in a narrative form based on notes taken during the interviews, the patients having given their agreement for this taking of notes and analysis. The texts were resumed and analyzed three years later. Twenty-five of the erotic fantasies belong to Loonis (1999, 2001a)'s studies and 5 additional fantasies were added for this present study (from the control subjects).

The method of analysis is empirical and exploratory and, starting from the structures drawn from the previous study, we located cognitive synergies, as new structures, based on Apter (1984) and Coulson (2001)'s works.

Result

The erotic fantasies appear primarily to be built on a great number of cognitive synergies. In themselves, and taken as a whole, fantasies already represent a synergy between reality and imagination. This is especially so when they are "put on stage" by adult partners, as a form of make-believe. Just as children are fond of playing mummies and daddies or doctors and patients, numbers of adults use these shared and played scenarios as preliminaries to sexual relations or as the means of sexual stimulation. Generally, the erotic fantasy remains secretly hidden in the psyche of each partner, being simply evoked within the consciousness during the period of sexual intercourse, or of masturbation. Many synergies characterize the metamotivational paratelic state, which is also implied in sexual activity. So, we take up each type of these cognitive synergy (as listed by Coulson, 2001) to show how they are found in the erotic fantasies.

Signifier/Signified Synergy

These synergies represent a particular case of the reality/imaginary or make-believe synergies. In the erotic fantasy, just as there is a contradiction between a painting (the *signifier*) and what it represents (the *signified*), such a contradiction exists between the sexual partner or oneself as a real person (the *signifier*) and the fantasy character (the *signified*) projected on this partner or oneself. An example drawn from an erotic fantasy of a couple (extract):

"I am a little ashamed to say it, but here it is: I am a small girl for this fantasy, I am less than twelve. Well, of course, I am rather a sassy little girl. Well, then, from there, I think that I am with my uncle-who-is-a-dirty-pig (she is laughing). That is my friend who wants to name himself like that."
(From Loonis, 1999).

Here a double signifier/signified synergy appears: The young woman who is imagining herself to be a small girl, and her partner who is incarnate in a sexually forward uncle.

Empathy/Alienation Synergy

This type of synergy is found in art and consists in presenting a work which is aesthetically admirable, but which contains at the same time uninteresting, repulsive, or disturbing elements. In an erotic fantasy such synergies seem like the superposition of an agreeable, pleasant, sympathetic, ordinary context, with coarse, obscene, aggressive, extraordinary elements. These empathy/alienation synergies are often present in the *crescendo* effect of the onanorhythmic repetition or in the final triggering phase of the fantasy, when its sudden transformation is intended to induce orgasm. In the example below, a young woman masturbates while imagining herself to be a ten year old young girl (signifier/signified synergy) who is punished by her mother for her masturbation. She is tied completely naked in the living room to be whipped. Here is what happened to her at the end:

“In the end, when I am very excited and I want to come, then I make a lot of people enter the living room. That depends on my feelings at that moment. I may make enter the little brother of the girl, or a male-neighbor, a female-neighbor. A trick that excites me very much, is when I make school boy or girl-friends of the girl enter. That is where the shame is at its maximum, but the excitation too, and the girl has an orgasm in front of all these people: for example, her mother, her father, and her friends.” (From Loonis, 1999).

The fact to be whipped by her mother, completely naked and lying in the living room represents the “empathy” face of the fantasy (one notes that “empathy” and “alienation” qualities are relative, because one can always find a thing even more shocking than the preceding one). The successive introduction of increasingly incongruous characters in this scene correspond to the “alienation” pole of the synergy.

Ambiguity Synergy

In this type of synergies, the effect is produced by the multiple interpretations which can be given to the same element, because of its ambiguity or of its inaccuracy. Usually present in art works, ambiguity often appears in erotic fantasies, in the shape of characters or actions where one does not precisely know if they have a link or not with sex. The ambiguous characters are at the same time male and female, adult and child, dominating and dominated; the actions can be at the same time professional and sexual, administrative and sexual, legal and sexually illegal, etc. In the famous sexual intercourse between Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinski, ambiguity synergy is on three planes: the President and Bill-the-lover, the trainee and Monica-the-mistress, the job at the White House and the sexual activity at the same place. In the following extract of a masturbatory fantasy (from a young woman), two ambiguities appear:

“My fantasy, is that of a girl who is in her bath, and a plumber comes in to make a repair (...). I have forgotten to tell you that there is also the mother (...). That is she who makes enter the plumber (a young and nice boy, it should be said in passing) and she has a great capacity of domination on her daughter (...). There, concerning her daughter, she gives to understand that she is a little girl, of no importance, in some kinds. She is fifteen or sixteen, but it is as if her mother did not seen her growing (...).” (From Loonis, 1999).

The first ambiguity synergy relates to the presence of the plumber: He is called by the mother for a repair, but in the presence of the girl in her bath, he is at the same time a sexual agent. The second synergy is produced by the mother and relates to the status of her daughter, who is at the same time a sixteen year old maid and a little girl whose sexual value should not be noticed. It is remarked that these two ambiguities are like the reflection of one another.

Inner-World/Outer-World Synergy

This type of synergy refers to the way in which our personal inner world of thoughts, images, memory, desires, and fantasies may be experientially fused with the external world of objective physical reality. Such synergies appear when certain individuals put on stage their erotic fantasies directly in the real world, without taking into account the social rules, the other and their feelings. All sexual delinquency is based on such inner-world/outer-world synergy which uses the distortion of the contexts by projecting a sexual fantasy on a context previously nonsexual (Loonis, 2001b): The school, religious or sporting context becomes sexually pedophilic with punitive, initiation, or hazing practices; working in a firm turns to sexual harassment; family life becomes incestuous; etc.

Synergies in the structures

The majority of cognitive synergies occur in connection with the paratelic state (Apter, 1984), are present and function in erotic fantasies to help the individuals to reverse their psychological barriers and also to allow them to elevate their level of sexual arousal and pleasure. We saw that the empathy/alienation synergy is associated with the onanorhythmic repetition or with the final triggering phase of the erotic fantasy, which are temporal structures. Now let us ask whether cognitive synergies could be associated with other structures discovered by Loonis. Our results are as follows.

The logic structure of the contexts fitting into each other represents a form of structural synergy, close to ambiguity synergy. In art, structural synergy consists of a variation on the same theme, different things being shown to be related through some unexpected kind of similarity (e.g. in music from a theme its variations, in painting two geometric patterns overlay each other in such a way that some identity in the picture partakes of both patterns). In certain erotic fantasies a first context integrates a second context, the second being sometimes very different, so that they are linked without being linked, in a strange manner. In the fantasy of a young couple, they first play the professional relation of a prostitute with her customer and, in this first context, they make pretence to reveal to each other their true identity, which builds a second context integrated in the first: She is a middle-class woman, who prostitute occasionally for money, and he is a vice squad inspector who is tracking prostitutes. This couple finds very exciting this mixture of contexts (From Loonis, 1999).

With regard to the three fantasy agencies attached to the role structures, Loonis (1999) specifies that the same character may, in turn or at the same time, adopt the roles of two or three agencies. We have there an ambiguity synergy between desire, prohibition, and diversion agencies. For example, in the fantasy described above of the girl, her mother, and the plumber, one sees that the girl first embodies the sexual prohibition agency (she is fighting against the advances of the plumber), the plumber that of the sexual desire (he shows himself forward with the girl), and the mother that of the diversion (she denies the sexual context by saying that all that is professional and that the girl is a little

asexual girl). However, in this fantasy, the mother is also, in some way, a prohibition agency, because if sexuality appeared too explicitly she would oppose it. In the same way, in this fantasy the girl fights against the sexual advances of the plumber, but in a more or less “soft” manner, because her excitation carries her towards the sexual desire agency (From Loonis, 2001a). One finds in Freud (1908) the description of an ambiguity synergy between two fantasy agencies in a hysterical female patient: “(...) *the patient plays at the same time the two roles of the underlying sexual fantasy (...) she holds in one hand her dress tightened against her body (as a female), while with the other hand she endeavours to tear off it (as a male).*” This is a synergy between prohibition (the female) and that of desire (the male) agencies.

More particularly, the diversion agency is at the source of many ambiguity or structure synergies, with its “smoke screen” effect. For example, in the masturbatory fantasy of a young man, he is imagining he is masturbated by a young lady doctor. However, what is exciting is that this young woman maintains throughout the scenario a nonsexual context by the effect of the medicalization: the masturbation is a therapeutic located massage, the “special” oil used is an active pharmaceutical product, the erection is a side effect of the treatment, and the ejaculation is an automatic spasm induced by the product. The arousal value of the fantasy lies in the integration of movement between these double interpretations. This is further complicated by the character of the young woman who is at the same time a doctor and a sexual partner (From Loonis, 2001a).

Many ambiguity synergies are found in erotic fantasies and serve the acting out: child/adult ambiguity in paedophilia, male/female in transvestism, spouse/prostitute in marital violence, employee/sexual partner in sexual harassment, and so on.

One finds still further cognitive synergies in the thematic structures of the fantasies. When the transgression is associated with a ritual, one deals with an identity synergy between the sexual transgression, usually a subject of reprobation, and the ritual which prescribes this transgression. In the fantasy of a young woman, she is imagining an African ritual during which she must mate with all the men of the village in public, which is usually prohibited (Loonis, 1999). Two other thematic structures, often associated, give place to synergies: the phallic exhibition and the humiliation. The humiliation of one of the characters in an erotic fantasy is never a true and traumatic moral wound. It is, rather, a mixed and ambiguous feeling of shame and sexual excitation at the same time. Phallic exhibition (of penis or vulva) is the other face of this ambiguity synergy: The more sexually excited the character is (which is symbolized by the exhibition of sexual organs), the more he is humiliated, and the more he is humiliated, the more he is excited. Lastly, in the thematic structure of the constraint, there is also a cognitive synergy between constraint and sexual desire: The character constrained to sexual acting find in this manner the means to be sexually excited “in spite of her/himself” (“I can’t help it!”). This is the case with the constraint of the desire agency by the prohibition one. In the opposite case of the constraint of the prohibition agency on the desire agency, the constraint takes here the form of punishment. Furthermore, the character punished for his sexual fault, receives a punishment in a sexual matter which simultaneously excites and prohibits. Loonis (2001a) has noted that many sexual constraints fit in with the reality of a social contract (such as administrative rules, work contract, school rules, and so on), which gives place to an inner-world/outer-world synergy within the framework of sexual harassment.

Conclusion

The concept of cognitive synergy appears to be essential to explain many aspects of the structures of erotic fantasies. The fantasies that have been reported here support Loonis (2001a)'s results which showed that erotic fantasies are especially structured to produce sexual activation and to serve the needs for sexual hedonic management. Thus we have a normal functioning of the human psyche, which spontaneously creates, without previous learning, its own imaginary structures that are able to induce a high level of arousal. (Erotic fantasies can be influenced by cultural supports like erotic novels, pornographic movies, and intimate conversations. However, the spontaneous and naive emergency of erotic fantasies around pre-adolescence, suggests a kind of innate capacity to invent and structure such scenarios — a capacity that is more or less developed in different individuals).

Beyond this normal functioning, sexual arousal can fulfill a role in the fight against mental suffering. In this case it takes an addictive turn and the structures of erotic fantasies are put to use in the service of compulsive masturbation. They may also come to be used for increasingly severe acting out, which leads to sexual delinquency (Carnes, 1983; MacCulloch et al., 1983; Prentky et al., 1989; Brown, 1997). Also, the knowledge of erotic fantasy structures, in particular of the cognitive synergies that they are using, may be useful to formalize prevention and care programs, both towards sexual dysfunction and sexual delinquency. For most people, erotic fantasies are the object of denial, just like the masturbation with which they are closely associated. However, sexual imaginary is implied in the sexual dysfunction, in the sexual problems of couples and those of sexual delinquency by the way of sexual and fantasy addictions. So, an analysis of fantasy structures can be a good support in approaching the erotic imagination in a dispassionate fashion, so as to develop prevention or care and rehabilitation programs.

In spite of the fact that a certain amount of research on erotic imagination has already been carried out (e.g., Crépault et al., 1977; Crépault & Couture, 1980; Friday, 1974; Hariton & Singer, 1979; Klinger, 1971, 1990; Laufer, 1976; Loonis, 1999, 2001a; May, 1980; MacCulloch et al., 1983; Pasini & Crépault, 1987; Person, 1995; Person et al., 1989; Prentky et al., 1989; Sarnof, 1975; Singer, 1966; Stoller, 1979, 1985; Sue, 1979), it would be enriching to extend these researches into not only the contents of fantasy, but also the structures of sexual fantasy. This is because in fact the structures support the functions and the uses of erotic fantasies, so that the latter cannot really be understood without the former. Wider empirical research, in the form of surveys in both general and pathological populations, should be carried out, as should experimental research intended to build assessment instruments. It would be interesting, for example, to develop structured inventories containing a range of scenarios and to measure the psychological affinity that different people have with such scenarios. This could give us a new insight into sexual delinquency and sexual violence.

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