



Episode 46 – The Reality of Fantasies?
Written and hosted by Lisa Dawn Hamilton
Music and audio by Jeremy Dahl

Note: This is the script used to create the episode with references added. It has typos. Only the interview is a direct transcript, but the rest sticks pretty close to the writing.

Intro

Welcome to Do We Know Things? A podcast where we examine things we think we know about sex.

Content warning: This podcast will include discussions of sexual fantasies, some of which include violence.

Hi everyone! I am Dr. Lisa Dawn Hamilton, professor of psychology and sex educator. Today on Do We Know Things, what do we know about fantasies?

What is your favourite sexual fantasy? Do you have one that pops to mind right away, or is it hard to decide a favourite? Maybe you don't fantasize at all, or only occasionally.

On today's podcast, I talk to Dr. Justin Lehmiller, a sex researcher, blogger, and podcaster who conducted the largest, most comprehensive study ever on fantasies. He asked over 4000 Americans about their favourite sexual fantasies along with tons of other questions related to desires and fantasies. His study resulted in lots of great stories and revealed both the wide range of things we fantasize about as well as the many similarities. Stay tuned as I ask him what we need to know and what we misunderstand about sexual fantasies. And you can find out if your top fantasy is in the top 3 he found in his research.

That's coming up on Do We Know Things!

Interview with Justin Lehmiller

Dr. Justin Lehmiller is a social psychologist and Research Fellow at The Kinsey Institute. He runs the [Sex and Psychology blog](#) and podcast and is author of the popular book [Tell Me What You Want: The Science of Sexual Desire and How It Can Help You Improve Your Sex Life](#). Dr. Lehmiller is an award-winning educator and a prolific researcher who has published more than 50 academic works, including a textbook titled [The Psychology of Human Sexuality](#) that is used in college classrooms around the world.

Here is our conversation.

[Transcript of the conversation]

Justin Lehmiller: Hi Lisa Dawn! Thanks for having me.

Lisa Dawn Hamilton: I'm excited to have you on the podcast and hear all about your research on fantasies.

JL: Well, I love to talk about fantasies, so I'm looking forward to it.

LDH: Before we get into my questions on *what do we know* about fantasies, I would love to hear more about how you started studying fantasies and how it came that you ran the largest study on fantasies, possibly in the world.

JL: So, my interest in sexual fantasies dates back to when I started teaching human sexuality courses in university settings. And my favorite day of the semester was always when we covered fantasies and I would ask students to anonymously submit their favorite fantasy of all time. And then we would read some of them and kind of look for common themes that emerged. And I was always really interested to learn about, you know, what other people were fantasizing about. And then a few years later, I started writing a textbook on human sexuality called *The Psychology of Human Sexuality* and as I was building out the section on sexual fantasies, I started coming across all of these questions I had about fantasies that had never been answered before. And I realized that our knowledge of fantasies is actually really limited in a lot of ways. One of the biggest limitations is that so much of it is based on surveys of college students and so we haven't known much about the fantasies of people throughout the lifespan and whether they change or evolve. There also wasn't really any research on the intersection between fantasy and reality. So how many people actually want to act on their fantasies? How many have done it and what were their experiences like...? So, I just started coming up with all of these questions and you know, I could have taken this sort of piecemeal approach- where I did a bunch of different studies over the course of time answering each question separately - or I could just kind of do one huge study to try and really answer all of these things at once. And so I conducted that survey: it was 4175 adults in the United States who participated, there were 369 questions on the survey. So, there was just this mountain of data and it made the most sense to me to publish that in the form of a book. It's called "*Tell Me What You Want*" (Lehmiller, 2018), and it came out originally in 2018. And I'm still learning new things from the data today because there's just so much in there. You know, there's over a million data points.

LDH: Right! Right!

JL: So, I love that it's sort of become this kind of endless thing where I can keep going back to it and there's just always new things I'm learning from it.

LDH: That's so cool! And so, you'll have more information coming out either in the form of research articles... You also have a blog [Sex and Psychology](#) and so you're always dripping us little tidbits beyond the book.

JL: Yes, I mean, there was just way more than I could ever get into even in a whole book, so I'm always coming out with new blog posts on things. I just didn't have the chance to really explore and dive into in the book.

LDH: And your book is so clearly laid out and it's so accessible to the average non-researcher. And I think that's why it's been so popular because it just really clearly laid out, it speaks to the average person but also has all this rich data and scientific theory going into it. And one of the first things you talk about in the book is common fantasies. So, could you tell us what the most common fantasies are?

JL: Sure. So, when I was writing the book, I decided to analyze people's favorite fantasy of all time and to look to see whether there were any common themes that emerged. And what I found in reading through all 4000 some fantasies, was that there were really seven themes that seemed to characterize most people's sexual fantasies. So, one of the most popular themes was multi-partner sex, so just having sex with more than one other person at the same time. Most commonly, in the form of a threesome but some people fantasized about much larger group settings. Another really big theme was power play. All the BDSM stuff falls into that category and, of course, that takes a lot of different forms from bondage to dominant/submissive play, to, you know, just all kinds of things, forced sex fantasies are a really common one in that category. Another big theme was novelty and adventure. So, just doing something that's totally new and different for you and oftentimes, that was just about having sex in a different setting. Often where there's kind of some added thrill to it, such as having sex in a public or semi-public setting. Then, there were the taboo fantasies, you know, just doing something you're not supposed to do sexually. Then there were the passion and romance fantasies, where it's all about, sort of, emotionally connecting to another person or feeling really desired. Then there are the gender bending and homoeroticism fantasies. So, I sort of characterize those fantasies as being about *pushing the boundaries* of your sexual orientation or your gender identity in some way. It's really all about self exploration and sexual fluidity and flexibility. And then the other big theme was being in some type of non-monogamous relationship and I know a lot of people are like “is that really a fantasy to be polyamorous or to try swinging?” and it is you know this is a big part of a lot of people's sexual fantasies- is not just having sex with multiple people at the same time in the same bed, but having the freedom and ability to have different sexual and or romantic relationships at the same time.

LDH: I think it's so interesting that you clearly found these common threads throughout because I think a lot of people, this factors into shame, think that their fantasy or the thing that they're into like they're the only one and they can never tell anyone. And so, I think having these data just being like “hey, these things are common”

JL: And you know, I did a follow-up study to the one that went in the book and I wanted to see, you know, how much validity is there to these seven categories and in the follow-up study, was a little smaller at about 2000 participants but I found that those seven fantasy themes accounted for 97% of the fantasies that people submitted when they described their favorite fantasy of all time. So, that suggests that, you know, there really is something to this. And I tend to think of these themes as kind of the building blocks of our fantasies and we can combine them in any number of ways. And our fantasies are kind of, you know, infinitely customizable.

LDH: I love that “infinitely customizable”. So here on *Do We Know Things?*, we like to figure out what the things we do know or the things we misunderstand. And I think when I talk about fantasies in my classes or when I teach sex ed to non-university samples, some of the biggest

pushback or confusion I get is around rape fantasies or forced sex fantasies. And you're saying that forced sex is one of the common ones. How common are they and, you know, why are rape fantasies so common for women?

JL: Yeah, so this was interesting. There is a fairly sizable literature on these fantasies and they go by a lot of different names. The term I kind of like is consensual non-consent fantasies when we're talking about them because it's not really about rape or sexual assault. If you look at the way that people describe these fantasies, it's really about being with a partner who has this overwhelming desire for you and when you're fantasizing about this, you're in control you dictate who your partner is how the story begins and ends. And so, you know consent is a theme that is very strongly present in these fantasies. But when you're talking about prevalence, I found that a majority- more than half of men and women, non-binary individuals across sexual orientations, you know, a majority of people- had fantasized about being forced to have sex before. And to me, that was really interesting and kind of surprising because there is this literature, as I mentioned on forced sex fantasies, and it's primarily focused on women and you know, there hasn't really been much attention to people of other genders and sexualities who might have these fantasies. And so, I find that it is pretty pervasive in the population, but on average, women do tend to have these fantasies more often than men. So, they're more likely to have them and likely to have them with greater frequency than men. I also asked about the reverse of that. So, "have you ever fantasized about forcing somebody else to have sex?" and you find the gender difference reverses where men are more likely to have fantasized about that but overall across genders, people are more likely to have fantasized about being forced to have sex than to fantasize about forcing sex on somebody else, which suggests that there's more of this tendency for people to be turned on by submission than domination.

LDH: And I think that's common throughout the BDSM communities and stuff, like there's always more subs than there are dominants and that can be a challenge. But I think there's a lot of pushback particularly about women. And I think maybe because the research is so much, or one of the reasons the research is so much on women, is because it's so shocking to people that women would fantasize about this thing that is supposed to be their worst nightmare. What are your thoughts on that?

JL: Yeah and you know, it's been interesting talking about these data in the "Me Too" era because increasingly, I have heard from women who are concerned about these fantasies, you know, they are very vocal advocates for survivors of sexual assault and believe the women and you know you know socially they are very on board with "Me Too" and with you know wanting to support victims survivors and so forth. And so, I think that creates this sort of tension because, on the one hand, they're turned on by this idea of forced sex but they also want to support survivors of sexual assault. And so, it kind of creates this cognitive dissonance to some degree. And so, you know, my thought on that is that this goes back to what we call these fantasies. And I think when we call them rape fantasies that's part of what creates a lot of the discomfort that people have. And so, I think by reframing them as consensual non-consent fantasies or something else along those lines, I think can go a long way toward distinguishing the fantasy of forced sex from the reality of sexual assault. And also, helping people to recognize these fantasies are common, you know, and you're normal if you fantasize about them because you know most people have fantasized about this at some point before. So, I've done a lot of educational work

around this, including with therapists to try and normalize these fantasies to some degree and also to really make that distinction between the fantasy of forced sex and the reality of sexual assault, because those are two totally different things that have nothing to do with one another.

LDH: Yeah absolutely, like with sex fantasies, it's very much about planning out like “this is how it's gonna happen”, this is where like the person who's being quote unquote “forced” is of course the one in control in the planning, etc. And it's done in a safe space with a safe partner, so there's no actual harm or risk of harm in terms of anything that would be similar to actual sexual assault.

JL: And you know, one other thing that's interesting about these fantasies is that I found that while forced sex was a very popular fantasy theme, it was one of the fantasies where people had a lot of concerns about acting it out in real life. And I think that makes sense because in the fantasy you're in complete control over everything and if you're going to act on this fantasy in the real world that necessitates giving up some control to someone else and so, I think that's where there's sometimes this disconnect where people might say hey the idea of this the fantasy of it really turns me on, but I don't actually want to do it because it's in my head, I'm in complete control.

LDH: That's a great point and I think when we say “fantasy” people often conflate with like “fantasies- what's happening in our head” versus “what we actually want to do”. And you touched on this already, but does fantasizing about something mean that someone wants to do that in real life?

JL: Yeah, I think it's really important to make a distinction between a sexual fantasy, a sexual desire, and sexual behavior. These are concepts that all overlap to some extent but they're all distinct. So, a fantasy is just a mental thought image or picture that turns you on, it creates arousal. And a fantasy may or may not be a desire. A desire is something that you actually want to do, it's a wish for your sex life, if you will. And I find that when you look at people's favorite fantasy of all time consistently across the studies I've done, about 80 percent of people say that their favorite fantasy is a desire. It's something they would like to do at some point. But that means for one in five people, they don't want to act on that fantasy and it can be for any number of reasons. They might have safety concerns about it, it might just be totally physically impossible for them to do, it, you know, it might take place in outer space with some alien species or in a sci-fi setting, right? And so, it's not something they can actually do. But, if you look across other fantasies people have, you know, if we're not just talking about people's favorite fantasy, most people are gonna have dozens, hundreds, maybe even thousands of fantasies over the course of their lives and they don't necessarily want to act on all of them. Right? Sometimes the fantasy is just the fleeting thought pops into your head once, there's no bearing on your sex life, and where you want it to go. Right? So it's really important to distinguish that fantasy from the desire component. And then further, when you talk about sexual behavior, you can engage in a sexual behavior that you've never fantasized about and that you've never previously desired. And if you try this behavior, let's say, your partner suggests it and in the moment you're like “all right, let's give it a try” and if you like it and enjoy it, then, that might become a future fantasy or a future desire. So, fantasy, desire, behavior, all overlap. But they're all distinct.

LDH: Right. I can see the Venn diagram now.

JL: Yes, you know, and I recently did an episode of my podcast where I talked to Aki Gormezano and Sari van Anders and we talked about sort of the overlap and they did this Venn diagram thing with what people fantasize about, what they watch in porn, and what they do in their real life. And you know, it's really fascinating when you plot that out. You see that there is this area where all of those things overlap but sometimes people watch porn that they don't fantasize about and that you know has no bearing on what they want to do in real life. And sometimes they fantasize about things and it's just a fantasy, and you know, sometimes people engage in behaviors that have no basis in fantasy or porn. So yeah, it's so interesting to sort of think about all these things and how they overlap. And maybe, how the degree of overlap is probably going to vary across individuals. And it might also vary across the span of your life, right, at certain points in time there might be more overlap between, say, what you watch in porn and what you do in real life. There's still a lot to learn about that.

LDH: Absolutely. There's so much we still don't know about fantasies. I'm so glad, though, that you've started us down this path of thinking more seriously and, like, getting more data about what people fantasize about. Something that I've heard you talk about before is the point of view of fantasies. What have you learned about perspective taking and focus and fantasies?

JL: So, that's a great question and it's something we still really don't know as much about as I would like to. And part of that reflects a bias I had on my part in going into the research was that I hadn't really given a lot of thought to the mental perspective that people take in their fantasies. So, for example, does it occur from a first-person perspective, where you know they're in the fantasy seeing it through their own eyes like it was something they were doing in real life, or is it a third person perspective where people are kind of essentially watching a movie and they're a character in it? And the way that I have fantasized and the way that I have my dreams, it's pretty much always from this third person perspective, like I'm a character in it and I'm watching myself in some way. And so, I didn't have any questions about that sort of perspective taking in my research. So, I don't have data on which to speak to you know how common different perspectives are, but I did a very informal, non-scientific twitter poll where I had several hundred people respond and I asked them you know "what perspective do you take in your fantasy?" and people are pretty split. You know, there are some who say it's always first person, some who say it's always third person and then some who say it switches and goes back and forth at different points in time. So, that does suggest that there is variability and it's something that I'm looking at in some current research I'm doing. So, I will have data to speak to that later but at this point, all I can say is what the results of the twitter poll said.

LDH: Excellent! I love that when you have an idea in your head, like by you, I mean anyone. And we think we're covering all the bases and then it goes out into the world and people are like, "well, why don't you think of this?" And you're like "oh, I just assumed everyone was this way, like I am" I do stuff like that all the time.

JL: Yeah and I think that's where we, as you know, sex researchers have to be mindful of our own biases that we might be bringing into the research. Because sometimes the way that we ask

questions, you know, that's informed by our own worldview, maybe our own experiences, and if you don't ask the right questions, you're not going to get the right data.

LDH: Exactly.

JL: It's going to be skewed in favor of what your bias was. So, I'm always trying to check myself for potential biases when I'm studying fantasies or anything else, because you really want to get at the truth and try and do this in the most objective way possible.

LDH: So, what are some other misunderstandings you think the general public has about fantasies?

JL: Well, there are lots of them. You know, the single biggest one, of course, is my fantasy normal? You know, I get that question all the time from people and everybody thinks that they're weird in some way. And I see in my data that, you know, I asked people how many other people do you think have this fantasy that you have, you know, in terms of their favorite fantasy of all time and they could guess the percentage of the population that likely has that fantasy. And what I saw was that across the board, people underestimated how common their fantasies were and the rarer they thought their fantasy was, the more shame and guilt and embarrassment they felt about it. And so again, I think that goes back to the importance of normalizing that there's a lot of diversity in fantasy content and the things that you're fantasizing about are probably the same things that everyone else is fantasizing about too. And I think that can help us to reduce and relieve a lot of the shame and anxiety that goes into fantasies as well.

I think you know another big misconception is that distinction between fantasy and desire. You know, for example, when somebody shares their sexual fantasy with a partner, oftentimes their partner assumes well that's what they want to do or you know if a partner stumbles across your porn search history and they'll say you're looking at gangbang porn say, for example, they might think that you're really into gang bangs or whatever, and you know, in reality you know what you watch in porn or what you fantasize about doesn't necessarily reflect what you actually want to do. As I said, you know sometimes a fantasy is just a fantasy. And so, if you're sharing fantasies with a partner, I think it's really important to lay out which ones are desires and which ones aren't. So that you're not giving your partner, say a mistaken impression of what it is that you're really into and what you would like to do together.

And then, I think you know, one other big misconception is sort of you know who appears in our sexual fantasies. Who are you fantasizing about? A lot of people just sort of assume that well if you're fantasizing about somebody other than your partner and you're in say a monogamous relationship that that means you want to cheat, or you're going to cheat, or that there's something wrong with the relationship. And what I find is that, you know, it's pretty normal for people to fantasize about a wide range of partners. I think a lot of people will be reassured to know that the one person who's most likely to appear in your fantasies is actually your current partner but that doesn't necessarily mean that your partner is always going to be in your fantasies. Where I find that there does seem to be a link to relationship dissatisfaction is if you only fantasize about people other than your partner. Right? So, if your partner isn't making any appearances at all, you know, that might say something about the quality of the relationship. But, just simply fantasizing about someone other than your partner- totally normal. And it makes sense because we're turned on by novelty, you know? And that's what our fantasies do- is they sort of provide

this endless stream of novel content that can increase arousal, help us to stay aroused during partnered sex, they can help facilitate an orgasm, fantasies can help us to relax to fall asleep... well, you know, sometimes they get us too excited to sleep... but, you know, fantasies serve a lot of different purposes in our lives and we need to normalize them a lot more.

LDH: Absolutely. And I think about so thinking of the partners I think you mentioned this also in *Tell Me What You Want*, is that a lot of times when I fantasize, it's not about a specific person. Right? Like it's about this amorphous person and it's about what's happening to me. It has nothing to do with the person it's more like what is going on in that situation. And I know you talk about that and then also like the different contexts and stuff, so that perhaps on average, for women, again of course, averages are- there's always overlap in these distributions but perhaps specific person is less important for women- and I know that's the case from in my experience.

JL: Yeah and that's, you know, one of the questions I had on the survey was "to what extent do you fantasize about a vague faceless person?" Right? So, it's somebody who you know doesn't have a clear identity and I do find that women are more likely, on average, to fantasize about that vague faceless person. And I think part of that reflects what you're saying- is that there is this gender difference where women are more likely to see themselves as being the object of desire in their sexual fantasies, whereas men are more likely to see themselves as acting on their object of desire. And so, I think, I wonder to what extent that might inform the different perspectives people take in their fantasies and whether that's linked to first person versus third person perspective. So, that's something I want to look at in my future research. But yeah, you know, sometimes our fantasies don't have a specific identifiable other person in them and sometimes it's more about you- maybe what's being done to you, or how you want to feel in that situation, and the other person is kind of irrelevant. And yeah, I also see that in a lot of say, threesome fantasies, where a lot of people will say "oh yeah, my biggest fantasy is me and two hot women" or you know, "being this hot guy and this non-binary person" or whatever, you know. And they don't have like specific others in mind, it's just sort of the idea of a group thing that's arousing. And the other people are kind of irrelevant. It's just multiple bodies in the room.

LDH: Yeah, lots of body parts having good sensations all over the place.

JL: Yes.

LDH: What do you think has been the biggest surprise to you in your research on fantasies?

JL: So, as a sex researcher who's been around for a while, it's kind of hard to surprise me anymore. Because, you know, I've kind of heard it all at this point. And there weren't really that many new fantasies that I learned about, at least for me, you know, one of the ones that I often talk about that's, you know, something I learned about through the process of this research, was the human-cow fantasy. You know, that was something that was totally not on my radar. And I had one participant who described their biggest fantasy as being tied up in the center of town and being force-fed hormones so that she would lactate continuously and then people could come and milk her and have sex with her whenever they wanted. I'm like, "that's interesting, I've never heard of this fantasy before" And so, I did this deep dive and found that, you know, actually we don't know how common it is, but we know that other people fantasize about it, there are lots of

human- cow erotica novels on amazon and porn videos out there on tube sites. So, you know, that was one of the interesting fantasies that I learned about and I think it just shows how endlessly creative and flexible we are with our fantasy content. In terms of other things that were surprising, I mean I guess for me, the other surprise was sort of like the lack of negative reaction to my work. You know, I kind of had expected that there would be some negative reaction because I feel like there's something in the book to piss everybody off in some way or another. So, sort of the lack of blowback that was actually honestly the most surprising thing about the work.

LDH: That was actually my next question, or, what are you getting pushback about? And are you saying that very little, like that's just not happening?

JL: Yeah, it just it hasn't really happened. And you know, this was something where when I was writing the book, I was petrified about certain sections of it and I would go back and write and rewrite and revise because I wanted to present the data in a way that wasn't going to lead people to shut down, you know, and just read it and be like “nope, I don't agree with that” And then have that interfere with their ability to, you know, engage with the work meaningfully. So, I did approach the subject with a lot of care and maybe that sort of helped to blunt, you know, some of the potential negative reactions to it. You know, I'm not somebody when it comes to sex and sexual fantasies that I just, like, speak off the cuff, you know. I think very carefully about every word that I say because I think we need to make this information accessible to the widest possible audience and recognize that different people are coming from very different sexual backgrounds. And so, it's actually a really tall order to be a sex educator who tries to speak to everyone, and I think that's one of the things that makes me a little different from some other sex educators. Because many of them have this very specific target audience that they're focusing on, so maybe they only speak to the LGBTQ+ population or maybe they only speak to women or to men, and so you know, I don't want to just limit myself to any one demographic. And so, in a lot of ways I've made my job a lot harder trying to be a sex educator for all.

LDH: And so, yeah, constantly having to take the perspective of any possible person who could be reading your work, but I think that really adds to the quality and accessibility of it. So, I think it's working. Well, thank you so much for being here, Justin. This was fascinating. I'm sure people will very much enjoy listening to what they don't know about fantasies.

JL: What they don't know and you know what we do know- and gosh there's still a lot to learn!

You can find Dr. Justin Lehmiller on Instagram [@justinlehmiller](https://www.instagram.com/justinlehmiller) and on his blog at sexandpsychology.com You can find his book, Tell Me What You Want, wherever you buy books.

Conclusion

I know I've said this before but it bears repeating, one of the things I am most passionate about in my work as a sex educator is reducing shame around sex. Fantasies can be a major source of shame for people. Most of us have sexual fantasies, but we rarely talk about them. When we believe our fantasies or desires are rare, that can lead to feelings of shame. But as Justin's data

shows us, even if you think you are the only one with a particular fantasy, chances are many, many people probably have the same one.

At the same time, it's also important to note that fantasies are not realities. While you might want to act on some fantasies, having a fantasy does not mean you want to or ever will act on it.

Overall, I think it is great to have fantasies. Whether it's a go to favourite that you return to time after time or if you prefer new fantasies all the time. Exploring fantasies keeps things fresh – even if just in your mind – and it makes you think about sex in a different way. We should all dare to (day)dream.

That's all for this episode. If you have any feedback or peer review of this episode, I am always excited to hear from you. You can send me a voice memo recorded on your phone or just a written email to doweknowthings@gmail.com.

You can find a script for this episode with references and extra info on the website at doweknowthings.com.

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References

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