

Assessment of the Wilson Sex Fantasy Questionnaire Among Child Molesters and Nonsexual Forensic Offenders

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The Wilson Sex Fantasy Questionnaire (WSFQ; Wilson, 1978) is a 40-item self-report questionnaire that assesses 4 types of sexual fantasies: Exploratory, Intimate, Impersonal, and Sadoomasochistic. The goal of the present study was to examine the differences between child molesters (n = 64) and nonsexual offenders (n = 41) on the WSFQ. Comparisons included the four underlying factors, 2 factors associated with the fantasizer's role in the fantasy (active vs. passive), and 2 items most closely related to sexual molestation behavior. Results found that molesters reported higher scores on the Exploratory and Intimate subscales, as well as overall fantasy. Scores on the Impersonal and Sadoomasochistic subscales were not significantly different. Molesters also reported higher scores on fantasies where they were the actor, and higher scores on fantasies most closely related to sexual molestation behavior. Subsequent analyses found that both offender groups reported significantly lower levels of fantasies than college comparison subjects and noncriminal sexual deviants. Differences among the 2 study groups are discussed in terms of social and cognitive characteristics of molesters.

KEY WORDS: Sexual fantasies; child molesters; forensic populations, instrument discriminant ability.

Researchers and practitioners have frequently theorized that sexual fantasies are an integral component in the development and reinforcement of sexually assaultive behavior (e.g., Abel & Blanchard, 1974; Barbaree & Marshall, 1991; Hall & Hirschman, 1992; Laws & Marshall, 1990; Looman, 1995). A similar position has been delineated in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition* (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). The *DSM-IV* (1994,

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p. 522) states that a diagnosis for any sexual paraphilia requires “recurrent, intense sexually arousing fantasies [or] sexual urges.” These fantasies support and reinforce an individual’s need to have the object of the paraphilia present for sexual gratification to occur. Even without the constraints of diagnostic paradigms, however, theorists have suggested that motivations underlying a sexual offender’s crime are likely influenced on some level by sexual fantasies (Knight, Warren, Reboussin, & Soley, 1998; Marshall, Laws, & Barbaree, 1990; Proulx, Perreault, & Quimet, 1999).

In spite of these theories, research has not yet provided us with a firm understanding about the prevalence or nature of sexual fantasy among sexual offenders (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995). Although a great deal of research has examined sexual/physiological arousal to various stimuli among sexual offenders (see Marshall, 1996; Quinsey, Harris, Rice, & Cormier, 1998), few attempts have been made to exclusively assess fantasies independent of physiological arousal (see Langevin, Lang, & Curnoe, 1998; O’Donohue, Letourneau, & Dowling, 1997; Rokach, Nutbrown, & Nexhipi, 1988, for examples of exceptions). A dearth of knowledge exists concerning the base rates of both deviant and nondeviant sexual fantasies among sexual offenders and how these rates differ from nonsexual offenders (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995).

The Wilson Sex Fantasy Questionnaire (WSFQ; Wilson, 1978) is a self-report measure of sexual fantasies. The 40 sexual fantasy items are categorized into four fantasy subtypes consisting of 10 items each. The items were compiled from a survey of scientific, clinical, and popular magazines (Wilson, 1978) and represent a range of sexual themes, “from the normal and innocuous to the deviant and potentially harmful” (Wilson, 1988, p. 49). Wilson’s factor analysis (Wilson, 1978) identified four fantasy subscales among the 40 items: *Exploratory* (e.g., group sex, promiscuity, and mate-swapping), *Intimate* (e.g., kissing passionately, oral sex, masturbation, and sex outdoors), *Impersonal* (e.g., sex with strangers, watching others engage in intimate behavior, fetishism, and looking at obscene pictures), and *Sadomasochistic* (e.g., whipping or spanking, being forced to have sex). The underlying four-factor structure has demonstrated consistency across multiple assessments among male subjects (Plaud & Bigwood, 1997). The sum of all 40 items also provides a total fantasy score that may be considered as an indication of “overall sex drive” (Wilson, 1988, p. 50).

Gosselin and Wilson (1980) reported that the WSFQ appeared able to capture differences in fantasy and to discriminate among men with sexual deviations. These researchers discovered that although men with deviant (though noncriminal) sexual interests reported similar levels of Intimate and Exploratory fantasies to controls, they reported significantly higher levels of Impersonal and Sadomasochistic fantasies than controls. Later research efforts continued to report that the WSFQ differentiated between not only sexually deviant and nondeviant groups (Wilson, 1988), but Japanese and Anglo-based cultural groups (Wilson, 1988), and male and female respondents (Wilson, 1988, 1997). Surprisingly, however, little information

is presently available concerning the ability of the WSFQ to discriminate between child molesters and nonsexual offenders.

More recently, other measures have been developed that attempt to assess deviant sexual fantasy among a sexual offender population (e.g., O'Donohue, Letourneau, & Dowling, 1997), even some that incorporate sexual fantasy as a mere component of assessment (e.g., Multiphasic Sex Inventory; Nichols & Molinder, 1984). However, due to its age, recognition, and ability to differentiate groups, the WSFQ may be seen as a desirable choice among those conducting research or treatment on sexual offenders. Furthermore, the WSFQ's seemingly innocuous method of assessing the dynamics of sexual fantasy may induce professionals to see the measure as a useful tool with sexual offending populations who may be resistant to instruments that have more specifically and graphically deviant items. For these reasons, it seems important to begin assessing the value of the instrument on sex offender samples.

The goal of this study was to examine the differences between child molesters (CM) and nonsexual offenders (NSO) from a forensic facility in their report on the WSFQ. Differences were to be examined by comparing the underlying four factors between the two offender groups. Other comparisons were to include two additional factors that address the role of the fantasizer, as well as a couple of items that most closely relate to sexual molestation behavior. This assessment was intended not only to determine the discriminant ability of the WSFQ among CM and NSO, but also provide some insight into the utility of the measure among forensic offender populations.

METHODS

Participants

The research materials were administered to a sample of 105 patients at a maximum-security state forensic mental health institution located in the Midwestern United States. Subjects resided at the facility for a variety of legal reasons, including civil commitment, competency evaluation and restoration, sanity evaluation, Not Responsible by Reason of Insanity, and those deemed to be treatable convicted sex offenders. Subjects were categorized into CM ($n = 64$) and NSO ($n = 41$) based upon charges documented in official records. CM were those who had sexually assaulted a child at some point in their criminal histories, with nearly equal halves choosing intrafamilial (46.9%) and extrafamilial (53.1%) victims. CM with a history of raping adult victims were excluded. NSO, on the other hand, were those who had not committed any sexual offense in their criminal history. The nonsexual offenses with which NSO were charged represented a wide variety of crimes, including homicides, assaults, robberies, narcotics crimes, as well as an array of property crimes, none of which were sexually related. Participation was voluntary and subjects were informed that their responses were strictly

Table I. Offender Characteristics

Characteristic	Offender group	
	Molesters	Nonsexual offenders
	<i>M (SD)</i>	<i>M (SD)</i>
Age (in years)	33.4 (9.4)	30.6 (9.4)
Highest level of education (in years)	11.7 (2.0)	11.1 (2.0)
	<i>% (n)</i>	<i>% (n)</i>
Marital status		
Married	31.2 (20)	17.1 (7)
Single/Divorced/Widowed	68.8 (44)	82.9 (34)
Race*		
Caucasian	89.1 (57)	73.2 (30)
Non-Caucasian	10.9 (7)	26.8 (11)
Sexually abused as a child**	43.8 (28)	14.6 (6)
Physically abused as a child**	32.8 (21)	9.8 (4)
Sexually inappropriate behavior as a juvenile***	29.7 (19)	2.4 (1)

Note. Molesters ($n = 64$), Nonsexual Offenders ($n = 41$).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p = .001$.

confidential. No incentives were offered for cooperation. Refusal rates, however, were less than 5% among the population.

Table I presents characteristics about the CM and NSO groups. Ethnic proportions of the two groups were different, $\chi^2(1) = 4.44$, $p < .05$. CM were also significantly more likely to have a history of physical, $\chi^2(1) = 7.25$, $p < .01$, or sexual abuse, $\chi^2(1) = 9.59$, $p < .01$, and more likely to have displayed sexually inappropriate behavior as a juvenile, $\chi^2(1) = 11.96$, $p = .001$.

Procedures

The WSFQ was administered to the participants as part of a larger set of assessment materials. Offenders completed the testing materials in a private room in small groups ranging from 2 to 4 individuals. All demographic, criminal history, and offense information was obtained from a review of each offender's institutional files. Offenders were coded into groups after criminal history information was recorded from official records and self-reports of crimes.

Coding of demographic, criminal history, and offense variables was completed by a group of research assistants who were trained over several weeks to properly identify the research variables and gather information from the institutional files. Information was pulled from the same document sources in each of the subject files. Any coding questions were brought to the attention of the authors and addressed during group coding sessions. Any disagreements about the coding were discussed and resolved among the authors.

RESULTS

A between-groups MANOVA was used to assess whether CM and NSO significantly differed from each other in their report on the four Wilson fantasy subscales. Results found an overall difference in the report of CM and NSO, Pillai's Trace = .13, $F(4, 100) = 3.71, p = .007$. The univariate findings revealed that CM reported experiencing Exploratory and Intimate fantasies more frequently than NSO. Experience of Impersonal and Sadomasochistic fantasies, however, was not significantly different between CM and NSO. The difference between CM and NSO on Impersonal fantasies, however, was nearly significant. Furthermore, ANOVA showed that CM reported experiencing significantly more overall sexual fantasy than NSO by reporting higher WSFQ total scores. Table II presents a summary of the results from the univariate and bivariate analyses as well as the internal consistencies of the four subscales and the total scale score.

Next, two other fantasy subscales were created for more focused analyses between the CM and NSO offenders in this study. Wilson (1988) noted that certain pairs of items on the WSFQ characterize the same theme while depicting the behavior using either active or passive imagery (e.g., giving oral sex vs. receiving oral sex, or hurting a partner vs. being hurt by a partner). Combining the seven active fantasies suggested by Wilson into one group and the seven passive fantasies into another group, the Active and Passive subscales were created. MANOVA discovered an overall difference between CM and NSO, Pillai's Trace = .07, $F(2, 102) = 3.69, p = .028$. Inspection of the results demonstrated that CM reported a higher frequency of Active fantasies than NSO. Meanwhile, the two groups reported relatively equivalent frequencies of Passive fantasies. Univariate and bivariate results are presented in Table III, along with the internal consistencies of the two scales.

Table II. Means (Standard Deviations) and Significance Tests for the Four Underlying WSFQ Subscales

Offender group	<i>N</i>	Exploratory ^a ($\alpha = .86$)		Intimate ^b ($\alpha = .92$)		Impersonal ^c ($\alpha = .83$)		Sadomasochistic ^d ($\alpha = .86$)		Total ^e ($\alpha = .95$)	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Nonsexual offenders	41	9.2	(9.6)	20.7	(12.7)	9.7	(9.8)	5.9	(8.4)	45.5	(35.9)
Molesters	64	13.6	(10.3)	28.1	(13.3)	13.0	(9.1)	4.8	(6.9)	59.6	(34.2)
<i>F</i> (<i>p</i>) ^f		4.81	(.031)	8.18	(.005)	3.08	(.082)	0.51	(.477)	4.08	(.046)

^aRange: molesters (0–40); NSO (0–36).

^bRange: molesters (0–50); NSO (0–46).

^cRange: molesters (0–35); NSO (0–40).

^dRange: molesters (0–36); NSO (0–32).

^eRange: molesters (0–140); NSO (0–139).

^f*df* = 1, 103.

Table III. Means (Standard Deviations) and Significance Tests for the Active & Passive Fantasy Subscales

Offender group	N	Active fantasies ($\alpha = .77$)		Passive fantasies ($\alpha = .76$)	
		M	SD	M	SD
Nonsexual offenders	41	6.4	(6.9)	7.2	(7.2)
Molesters	64	9.4	(6.1)	8.3	(6.0)
$F(p)^a$		5.24 (.024)		0.71 (.401)	

^a $df = 1, 103$.

Finally, two individual items conveying potentially deviant sexual scenarios were examined for group differences. These two items were selected because they were the ones that seemed to be associated with the deviant sexual interests theoretically associated with CM most directly. On the first item, "having sex with someone much younger than yourself," ANOVA found that CM reported experiencing this fantasy at significantly higher rates than NSO, $M = 2.00$, $SD = 1.54$ and $M = 0.85$, $SD = 1.46$, respectively; $F(1, 103) = 14.39$, $p < .001$. On the second item, "seducing an innocent," results found that CM also reported experiencing this fantasy at significantly higher rates than NSO, $M = 1.58$, $SD = 1.72$ and $M = 0.73$, $SD = 1.34$, respectively; $F(1, 103) = 7.16$, $p = .009$.

Cross-Study Comparisons of Subscale Scores

Scores on the four WSFQ subscales (Exploratory, Intimate, Impersonal, and Sadomasochistic) that were obtained from CM and NSO in this study were compared to scores from two prior studies. These comparisons were conducted to determine whether the factor scores from the offender groups in the present sample were significantly different from a sample of college males (Plaud & Bigwood, 1997) and from a sample of males describing themselves as sexually deviant and noncriminal (fetishists, sadomasochists, and polyvariant) (Wilson, 1988). Independent samples t tests were employed to examine the mean factor differences.

Table IV displays results from these analyses. In terms of CM, analysis found that they reported scores that were similar to college males and fetishist males on all four subscales, as well as the total score. Compared to sadomasochistic and polyvariant males, however, CM reported significantly lower Exploratory, Impersonal, and Sadomasochistic subscales scores, as well as lower total fantasy scores. In terms of NSO, results found that they reported significantly lower Exploratory and Intimate subscale scores than college males, as well as lower total fantasy scores. Compared to fetishist males, NSO reported significantly lower Exploratory, Intimate, and Impersonal subscale scores, as well as

Table IV. Comparison of Study Scores for WSFQ Subscales

Subscale	Present sample NSO (n = 41)		Present sample molesters (n = 64)		College males ^a (N = 116)		Fetishist males ^b (n = 24)		Sadomasochistic males ^b (n = 34)		Polyvariant males ^b (n = 14)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Exploratory	9.2	(9.6)	13.6	(10.3)	14.3 ^c	(7.9)	15.8 ^c	(7.6)	20.9 ^{d,e}	(8.4)	21.7 ^{d,f}	(11.0)
Intimate	20.7	(12.7)	28.1	(13.3)	31.7 ^d	(9.3)	28.1 ^g	(9.4)	30.9 ^d	(10.0)	33.5 ^d	(9.2)
Impersonal	9.7	(9.8)	13.0	(9.1)	11.7	(6.8)	16.0 ^c	(6.7)	22.5 ^{d,h}	(7.5)	22.8 ^{d,h}	(10.3)
Sadomasochistic	5.9	(8.4)	4.8	(6.9)	4.9	(5.7)	5.1	(3.8)	20.6 ^{d,h}	(5.9)	32.0 ^{d,h}	(6.3)
Total	45.5	(35.9)	59.6	(34.2)	62.6 ^d	(23.9)	65.0 ^g	(22.1)	94.9 ^{d,h}	(24.5)	110.0 ^{d,h}	(30.9)

^aData are from Plaud and Bigwood (1997).

^bData are from Wilson (1988).

^cSignificantly different from present sample of NSO, $p < .01$.

^dSignificantly different from present sample of NSO, $p < .001$.

^eSignificantly different from present sample of molesters, $p < .01$.

^fSignificantly different from present sample of molesters, $p < .05$.

^gSignificantly different from present sample of NSO, $p < .05$.

^hSignificantly different from present sample of molesters, $p < .001$.

lower total fantasy scores. Lastly, NSO reported significantly lower scores on all four subscales and lower total fantasy scores than sadomasochistic and polyvariant males.

DISCUSSION

In comparison to NSO, CM in this study reported significantly higher levels of sexual fantasies on both the Exploratory and Intimate fantasy subscales. The reported levels on the Impersonal and Sadomasochistic subscales, however, were relatively similar. The lack of difference is not surprising, given that neither strong fetishist interests nor extreme forms of sexual violence were evinced from documented sexual histories or from clinical interviews with the CM in this study.

The differences between CM and NSO on the Exploratory and Intimate subscales of the WSFQ may provide some insight into sexual fantasy patterns. Given the sexually experimental nature of the Exploratory subscale, it is not surprising that CM, many of whom may tend to obsess about (Sahota & Chesterman, 1998) and experience an enhanced frequency and variety of sexual behavior (see Langevin, Wright, & Handy, 1989; O'Connell, 1998), reported significantly higher scores. As noted by authors in the above citations, the potential causes of this wide range of sexual behavior are varied. Although the contributory mechanism(s) for heightened experimental interests are not clear, the Exploratory subscale does appear to at least capture this tendency. Furthermore, elevation on the Intimate subscale among CM may correspond to CM's increased sexual preoccupation in comparison to NSO.

Analysis of the theoretical Active and Passive fantasy subscales also found differences between CM and NSO. CM expressed higher levels of Active fantasies than NSO, although both groups expressed relatively similar levels of Passive fantasies. Neither of these subscales was identified in Wilson's factor analysis (Wilson, 1978) or was considered part of the primary underlying structure of the WSFQ, but they seem to capture an important dimension, nonetheless. It is possible that part of this dimension is associated with one's sense of control or power within the imagined sexual situation. Perhaps the majority of sexual fantasies CM experience involve placing themselves in a position of control rather than a position of submission. These findings may support several theories about sexual molestation: CM may envision perpetrating sexual behavior more obsessively than other offenders (e.g., Laws & Marshall, 1990; Pithers, 1990); but CM imagine being confident and sexually assertive, although they are markedly unassertive in daily life (e.g., Marshall & Barbaree, 1990; Marshall, Barbaree, & Fernandez, 1995). Similarly, a lack of significant differences in Passive fantasies may support the notion that CM maintain a position of power within imagined sexual situations, more often than NSO, as a way of compensating for a lack of confidence, unassertiveness, and feelings of powerlessness.

Another possible explanation for the differences between CM and NSO on the four underlying subscales and the Active and Passive subscales relates to an offender's experiences of abuse and sexually inappropriate behavior as a juvenile. As the background data in Table I display, CM experienced significantly more abuse and were described as engaging in more sexually inappropriate behavior as juveniles than NSO. Perhaps these experiences relate to a greater intensity of fantasies, particularly those involving the experimental sexual behavior, sexualized intimacy, and self-confidence, assertiveness, and power elements already discussed in terms of CM. The role that a history of abuse may play in the nature and development of sexual fantasy behavior is complex and needs further examination in future research.

More broadly, a greater variety of sexual experiences in one's past may relate to a wider range of sexual fantasy themes and greater levels of intensity because the individual would be able to relate fantasies to real behavior. On the other hand, CM without extensive sexual experience may actually fantasize more frequently and with a wider range of themes as a substitute for the lack of real sexual behavior. A brief analysis was conducted on this data using the marital status groupings identified on Table I to assess the concept of "real sexual experience," finding no significant differences. This lack of difference possibly suggests that marital history may not be a good indicator of sexual history or that sexual experience may not have a significant influence on fantasy behavior. In either case, the complex manner in which sexual experience affects sexual fantasy behavior for CM remains uncertain and needs further examination.

Lastly, it is also important to note that the NSO group in this sample consisted of a fairly diverse population. These offenders represent a wide array of offenses, background characteristics, and mental dysfunction that could have a significant impact on the expression of sexual fantasies for this group as a whole. This feature may be a caveat to consider when extending these findings to other populations of NSO, particularly when considering specific crimes or demographic characteristics. It is also possible that some of the NSO have engaged in some undetected molestation behavior that could be influencing their pattern of report on the WSFQ, such that the magnitude of differences on the Exploratory and Intimate subscales was reduced and the detection of differences on the Impersonal and Sadomasochistic subscales was hampered.

We found that offenders from both study groups generally reported significantly lower levels on the four underlying WSFQ subscales, when compared to several different samples of nonoffenders from other studies. This pattern is consistent with the findings of other researchers who report low levels of self-reported sexual fantasy in sexual offender populations (e.g., Langevin et al., 1998). Interestingly, although CM reported scores similar to college males and fetishist males, their scores were significantly lower than sadomasochistic and polyvariant males, with the exception of the Intimate subscale being similar to all the comparison groups. This finding may indicate that either males with certain deviant interests

are more dynamic fantasizers than others, or that males who comfortably identify with certain deviant interests are less likely to underreport fantasy themes. Both CM and NSO likely responded defensively (underreported) to the WSFQ items in an effort to appear favorable. This reaction would be particularly expected among CM, for whom identification as a sexual offender and continual focus on and evaluation of sexual thought and behavior are repeated experiences in the forensic hospital setting. The comparison of this study's findings with those from other studies suggests that the scores of offenders may not be reliable enough to compare to nonoffender populations. Consequently, weighing scores from offender populations, such as in this study, against some roughly established baseline may also be very difficult. In light of the disparity between the factor scores for CM and NSO found in this study, however, there may be some value in contrasting scores within offender populations.

Finally, results that found CM reporting significantly higher frequencies of individual WSFQ items most closely approximating molestation behavior may be important for understanding the differences found between CM and NSO, and may speak to the discriminant utility of the WSFQ. Disparity on these two items seems to indicate that CM think about sexual fantasies that involve partners whose qualities could be seen as matching those of children (innocence and aged significantly younger), thereby suggesting that the WSFQ differences between CM and NSO are in the expected direction. It is possible that these relatively innocuous items may serve as the best proxies for molestation behavior within the measure.

In closing, the WSFQ has demonstrated limited value as a research and clinical tool among offenders. Although the instrument demonstrated interpretable variation on two scales between CM and NSO, comparison of the offender scores with the nonoffender samples seems inappropriate. Offenders from both groups reported fewer fantasies than nonoffenders, suggesting artificially muted reporting among the offenders in this sample. Nevertheless, WSFQ factor scores may provide some helpful information when assessing different types of offenders, such as CM and NSO. Further analyses should examine the relationship between levels of WSFQ subscales and sexual offense behavior (e.g., sexual recidivism and intensity of sexual violence) to shed light on the relationship between WSFQ items and factors to specific offense behavior. It is important to note that, despite its utility to describe and differentiate basic sexual fantasies, the WSFQ is a self-report measure. Corroboration of self-report data with other sources of information, such as assessments of physiologic arousal to various stimuli, may be useful.

The establishment of normative standards for the WSFQ among offender populations would further aid the interpretation of factor scores. Researchers and clinicians would be better able to compare the factor scores and overall fantasy level among different types of offenders. Such ability would require a considerably greater amount of data from CM across a variety of sites and at several different points in time. Reported levels of fantasies by individuals may vary considerably

across time due to a plethora of factors that include mood, legal context, and possible treatment effects.

Finally, one shortcoming of the WSFQ is that individual items do not provide enough detail to relate to specific offense characteristics. Individual fantasy items on the WSFQ are general in content, intended to allow the respondent to apply whatever variations and contexts onto the fantasy behavior he may wish. The general nature of the items may be an attempt to prevent underreporting; however, our data suggests that offenders still underreport. These items generally do not describe the sexual behavior in detail nor do they provide discrete variations upon such things as the age and gender of the sexual partner, or the potential sexual behaviors in which a respondent could engage. Absent the presence of these details in a sexual fantasy measure, however, it is difficult to analyze relationships between an actual sexual behavior committed during an offense and a corresponding fantasy sufficiently describing the behavior. Therefore, the WSFQ may not be the best measure available for use among sexual offending populations, though it holds some value as long as one is conscious of its limitations.

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