

Digging in My Secret Garden:

Erotophobia, the “Hidden Observer,” and Reported Sexual Fantasies

Christopher T. Burris^a & Stefanie Mathes^b

^aDepartment of Psychology, St. Jerome's University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G3 (cburris@uwaterloo.ca)

^bDepartment of Psychology, McGill University, Montreal, Quebec, H3A 1B1

Background

Survey-oriented sexuality research is reliant on self-report, but the sensitivity of the topic raises serious questions concerning the impact of self-report biases.

Anonymity reduces, but does not eliminate, self-report bias; the most effective extant technique to minimize bias involves elaborate in-lab deception and is thus unwieldy and cost-ineffective for most purposes (see Alexander & T. D. Fisher, 2003).

Altemeyer's (1996) survey research offered a promising alternative by appealing to respondents' "Hidden Observer" (HO; see Hilgard, 1973) – who presumably sees all, knows all, and will tell all when specifically prompted to do so.

We examined the usefulness of the HO technique experimentally by soliciting details concerning individuals' favorite sexual fantasy in response to either standard or HO instructions.

To the extent that the HO prompt has a disinhibitory effect, we expected this to be most evident among those whose attitude toward sexual stimuli is generally negative – that is, erotophobic individuals (because erotophilic individuals would presumably be more open with respect to sexual disclosures by default).

Method

Participants

90 Canadian undergraduate volunteers (49 women, 37 men, 4 not indicated) participated in a study exploring “how and why variations exist in the sexual fantasies that people report.” Preliminary analyses revealed no significant effects of gender.

Predictor Variable: Erotophobia

In the first on-line session, participants completed Semph's (1979; see W.A. Fisher, Byrne, White, & Kelley, 1988; Rye, Meaney, & W. A. Fisher, 2011) 5-item Sexual Opinion Survey – Short Form as a measure of erotophobia (possible range of 5-35; Cronbach's alpha = .60). Men ($M = 17.78$; $SD = 4.13$) averaged lower ($p < .001$) than women ($M = 21.42$; $SD = 5.76$).

Hidden Observer Manipulation

In the second on-line session (at least two days later), written accounts of a sexual fantasy were solicited from participants via one of two (randomly assigned) instruction sets. Specifically, HO condition participants ($n = 43$) read:

“Imagine that there exists a part deep within you that you could call the ‘hidden observer’. This part of you knows every detail of all behaviour and thought processes that go on within you and is aware of the deepest intimate information about yourself. However, it cannot be asked to talk about this intimate information unless it is allowed by you to do so.

Now, please ask your ‘hidden observer’ to bring to mind your absolute favourite sexual fantasy. Once your ‘hidden observer’ has this fantasy in mind, please ask your ‘hidden observer’ to describe it in as much detail as possible, using whatever words seem appropriate. Ask your ‘hidden observer’ to give details regarding the setting, the activities and sequence of events, your role and the role of any other actors, plus any details that come to mind, regardless of how random they may seem.”

Standard instructions ($n = 47$) requested the same details, but made no reference to the HO.

Outcome Variables (coded from text responses)

- 1) Text length (# of characters)
- 2) “Hesitation Index” = summed occurrences of:
 - a) overt denials of sexual fantasies
 - b) apologies re.: lack of creativity
 - c) apologies re.: writing style/brevity of text
 - d) refusals to elaborate
- 3) “Erotica” Index = summed units of meaning pertaining to:
 - a) passionate and/or overtly sexual actions
 - b) affectionate, companionate actions such as cuddling and ‘pillow talk’
 - c) specific references to the temporal/spatial context of the above activities
- 4) Non-sexual (non-romantic) activities
- 5) Explicit language occurrences (whether terminology or “dirty” words)
- 6) Euphemistic language occurrences

Outcome Variables (self-report rating scales: 1 = not at all; 7 = very)

- 7) “Compensatory Affect” before, during, after fantasy is usually “switched on” = troubled, isolated, powerful, in control, and angry (Cronbach's alphas = .82, .84, and .89)
- 8) Positive Affect before, during, after fantasy = happy and playful (Cronbach's alphas = .73, .75, and .78).

Results and Discussion

Table 1

Text Length, Hesitation to Disclose, and Content-Related Features of Sexual Fantasies as a Function of Instructional Set

	Standard Instructions (SI)	Hidden Observer (HO)	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Total Text Characters ^a	532.15 (551.07)	476.31 (451.41)	< 1	ns
Hesitation Index	.21 (.51)	.02 (.15)	2.44	.02
Erotica	10.11 (9.50)	17.30 (20.31)	2.12	.04
Explicit Language	1.74 (2.55)	3.07 (3.89)	1.89	.06
Nonsexual Details ^b	.80 (1.28)	1.05 (1.85)	< 1	ns
Euphemistic Language	1.02 (1.29)	1.07 (1.35)	< 1	ns

Note. Bolded *ts* are based on pooled variance estimates. ^aindicates the removal of three outliers ($z > 3$: 2 in the SI condition, 1 in the HO condition); ^bindicates the removal of one outlier ($z > 3$ in the SI condition).

Table 2

Correlations between Erotophobia and Fantasy Outcome Variables as a Function of Instructional Set

	Standard Instructions (SI)	Hidden Observer (HO)
	($n = 47$)	($n = 41$)
Total Text Characters ^a	-.43**	-.05
Hesitation Index	.22	-.06
Erotica	-.35*	-.13
Explicit Language	-.41**	-.27
Nonsexual Details ^b	-.30*	.19
Euphemistic Language	-.06	.04
	($n = 42$)	($n = 38$)
Compensatory Affect-Before	.09	.50***
Compensatory Affect-During	.24	.33*
Compensatory Affect-After	.06	.33*
Positive Affect-Before	-.33*	-.46**
Positive Affect-During	-.39**	-.32*
Positive Affect-After	-.21	-.23

Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. ^aindicates the removal of three outliers ($z > 3$: 2 in the SI condition, 1 in the HO condition); ^bindicates the removal of one outlier ($z > 3$ in the SI condition).

Compared to Standard Instructions participants, HO participants overall were:

- less hesitant to disclose sexual fantasies
- more willing to write explicit fantasies (specifically)

Moreover, HO instructions appeared especially likely to disinhibit erotophobic individuals, as evident in the:

- elimination of significant negative correlations between erotophobia/text variables in the HO condition
- willingness of erotophobic individuals in the HO condition to admit bringing a favorite sexual fantasy “on-line” when feeling troubled, isolated, and angry

The HO technique thus appears to be a simple, survey-friendly means of reducing self-report bias in sexuality research.

References

- Alexander, M. G., & Fisher, T. D. (2003). Using the bogus pipeline to examine sex differences in self-reported sexuality. *Journal of Sex Research, 40*, 27-35.
- Altemeyer, B. (1996). *The authoritarian specter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Fisher, W. A., Byrne, D., White, L. A., & Kelley, K. (1988). Erotophobia-erotophilia as a dimension of personality. *The Journal of Sex Research, 25*, 123-151.
- Hilgard, E. R. (1973). The domain of hypnosis, with some comments on alternative paradigms. *American Psychologist, 28*, 972-982.
- Rye, B. J., Meaney, G. J., & Fisher, W. A. (2011). Sexual Opinion Survey. In T. D. Fisher, C. M. Davis, W. L. Yarber, & S. L. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of sexuality-related measures, 3rd ed.* (pp. 231-236). New York: Routledge.
- Semph, M. E. (1979). *Emotional orientation towards sexuality: Its relation to expecting and perceiving contraceptive side effects*. Unpublished honours thesis. University of Western Ontario, Department of Psychology, London, Ontario, Canada.