

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7546/PsyRB.2024.27.01.05>



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PSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH (IN THE BALKANS)

<http://journalofpsychology.org>

E-mail: psy_research@abv.bg

Volume 27, No 1, 2024, 57-74

IMAGINING THE INTANGIBLE – A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH REPORT ON THE SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCE IN FANTASY

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Abstract. *Defining the nature of fantasy within the scope of research in psychology is challenging. The term fantasy relates to imaginative activity, internal representation, daydreaming and mental imagery as well to the productive use of imagination and creativity. The concept of fantasy proneness is proposed as a stable trait-like syndrome that involves engaging in vivid fantasies, daydreaming and concomitant perception. The present study introduces a research approach to fantasy that explores aspects of meaning, affect and motivation in imaginative activity*

The paper reports findings from qualitative analysis on the subjective experiences and understanding of the phenomenon of fantasy. A semi-structured interview was employed as a research method in the first study of fantasy in a Bulgarian adult sample. A total of 27 people participated in the study. That included 11 males and 15 females (average age of 42.8 years) and one boy at the age of 7. Fantasy is generally conceived as a universal experiential phenomenon in the quest for the unattainable.

The central role of desire is notable in reported data. It is recognized as a central feature in potentiating fantasy contents and triggering imaginative activity. An interesting trend is documented in experiential states of fantasy. Participants recognize active and passive sense of agency in imaginings. A critical thinking attitude towards aspects of fantasy experience is consistently reported across all participants. Most participants perceive fantasizing as a private positive experience related to desire, respite and sensation seeking. Yet a similar proportion of participants' responses considers difficulties in imaginative experience. Common words and phrases related to fantasy are reported. Research findings support scientific efforts in formulating a testable theoretical model on the structure and functions of fantasy in experiential and social and cultural domain of human activity.

Keywords: fantasy; fantasy proneness; imagination; imaginative activity; daydreaming; meaning; cognition; affect; motivation; semi-structured interview.

THE ARTICLE CAN BE CITED AS FOLLOWS:

Petrova, Y. (2024). Imagining the Intangible – a Qualitative Research Report on the Subjective Experience in Fantasy. *Psychological Research (in the Balkans)*, Volume 27, Number 1, 57-74. ISSN 2815-4797 (Print), ISSN 2815-4800 (Online). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7546/PsyRB.2024.27.01.05>

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Submitted – 2 February 2024

Revised – 30 May 2024

Published – 30 June 2024

The author has read and approved the final manuscript.

Introduction

Establishing an explicit definition of the fantasy construct frequently reflects the specific objectives of scientific research. Fantasy refers to the work of imagination, and in some Bulgarian writings, “fantasy” and “imagination” are utilized as synonyms (see Corsini, 1998; Andreeva, 1999). This conflation constrains understanding aspects in phenomenological experience and hinders exploring interrelationships.

A further challenge lies in the absence of a clear constructive distinction between the concepts of *fantasy* and *daydreaming*, that would yield different approaches in studying these phenomena. The activity of imagining is not clearly conceptualized in Bulgarian psychological writings. Different concepts are being used as interchangeable: *dream*, *imagery*, *fantasy*, *mental stimulation*. Studies of imaginings refer to divergent phenomena and do not offer clear boundaries of fantasy. In English scientific writing disengaging from interaction with the environment and directing attention towards the reality of inner experience, is typically denoted as daydreaming, mind wandering, mental imagery, or fantasy engagement. Eric Klinger (1971) is among the first to utilize the term “fantasy” while proposing a model delineating its structural content and the functions it serves. Klinger conceptualizes fantasy as a reservoir of energy and a repertoire of potential actions (Klinger, 1971:228-239). Investigations on mental activity in fantasy encompass various phenomena and processes associated with imagination, such as symbolic play, daydreaming, mental representations, and associative activity.

The scientific understanding of fantasy reveals awareness in discrepancies between the unreal and the imagined, volitional immersion in fictional narratives and ingenuity preceding creative fantasy. The conscious suspension of disbelief permits profound and authentic experiences (reactions) to fantasy contents (Plante et al., 2017:1; Weibel et al., 2017).

Imagination and Fantasy

In medieval thought, imagination, often referred to as phantasia, is the soul perceiving what is given by the senses (Gradev, 2023:23). Imagining relates to transfiguring impressions into a renewed mode of perception in sense-making. Fantasy reshapes reason and feeling in a united experience (Asma, 2017; Petrova, 2023). William James (1890) describes the reproductive faculty of the mind and introduces those mental images of possible sensible experienc-

es that exists independently of language. He denotes fantasy as an immediate phenomenon of imagination and faculty of sensation to reproduce original impressions once felt and distinguishes it from the “productive” capacity of imagination to recombine elements from different originals as to make new wholes (James, 1890:238).

Sigmund Freud (1908) introduces a perspective towards imaginative activity, dreaming and childhood play as a source of pleasure. Freud considers “phantasy” a substitute for play and accounts for the difference between these two by the linking of imaginary objects to tangible experience in the real world (Freud, 1908, p.421-423). The opposite of play is what is real. In play man transfigures the world, acts as if and is emotionally engaged in the imaginative activity. Carl Gustav Jung’s (Jung, 1971; Jung, 1993) conceptualization of fantasy encompasses the notion of *fantasy-image* and *imaginative activity*. In its content the image refers not to a particular external object but to the experience once felt. Imaginative activity refers to the stream of consciousness and representation of mental objects, it is a condensed expression of psychic life. Distance from the experience of sensuous reality reveals the genesis of inner image. That is Mundus Imaginalis, or the world of Active Imagination, is term coined by the French Orientalist Henri Corbin (Corbin, 1972; Corbin, 2017:219). Corbin elaborates on the meaning of the term imaginary and critically addresses the usage of something outside of being and existence, something utopian. The philosopher suggests an order in the dynamics of imaginary that unifies *reason* and *perception*, reflecting inner experiences and beliefs. He refers to it as Na-kojd-Abad, the Land of Nowhere (Corbin, 1972). Faculties and inner movements pertain to a peculiar visionary state occupying the space between falling asleep and waking up.

Fantasy proneness as a trait-like inclination to immersive experiences in imagination is introduced in the literature a decade later (Wilson & Barber, 1982; Lynn & Rhue, 1988). Sheryl Wilson and Theodore Barber coined the term fantasy prone personalities to describe highly prevalent fantasy activities in a small portion from the general population (Wilson & Barber, 1982). Scientific studies on fantasy proneness in the 1980s (Wilson & Barber, 1982; Lynn & Rhue, 1986; Rhue & Lynn, 1987; Lynn & Rhue, 1988) and the early 21st century (Merckelbach, Horselenberg & Muris, 2001; Merckelbach, Otgaar & Lynn, 2021) indicates several components in the structure of fantasy with distinctive role in adaptation (Petrova, 2022, 2023).

Motivation and Adaptation

In the early 1970s, the American scientist Eric Klinger (Klinger, 1971) introduces new perspective in conceptualization of fantasy as a motivation problem, a tendency to engage in specific class of mental activity for a particular interval of time (minutes, hours). Klinger approaches fantasy as a universal human activity associated with a source of energy and directed actions. Prior to unfolding of a fantasy reaction, an appropriate meaning structure is established and a directed activity for presenting thematic contents already exist. This meaning complex is unarticulated. It implies diverse forms of imaginal response but its essence it does not contain verbal content.

By the mid-20th century, empirical data on the constructive nature of fantasy and its role in social adaptation have accumulated (Klinger, 1990; Singer et al., 1966; Singer, 1977). Jerome Singer addresses scientific problems in studying inner states and activities within the constantly changing stream of consciousness (perceptions, ideas, representations, imageries). He presents the fundamental function of symbolic play and imaginative activity and emphasizes on the importance of a scientific approach to studying inner experiences. Fantasies are not simply reflections of perception, but complex structure of internal interactions and images interpreted on a mental screen (Singer & Streiner, 1966; Singer, 1977).

Bulgarian psychologist Asen Petkov (Petkov, 1978, 2003) employs the concept “poetization of the world” (Petkov, 2003:145) to describe notions of fantasy akin to those articulated in the western literature in psychology. Petkov defines this as “the imagination that plays to identify with certain external objects, situations, events or the person himself creates them as an artistic creation (art), various myths, religious concepts, and others” (Petkov, 2003:146-147). Petkov highlights the social functions of fantasy engagement and the potential risk of excessive poetics, which may result in the individual’s detachment from reality and immersion in an illusion.

Contemporary scientific investigation of the effect of fantasy on psychological development and social functioning focus more on the *intensity of engagements* and *unfolding of mental response* (mental contrasting, indulge or dwell in imagination) than to the qualities of the imaginative activity (cognition, affect, perception). Identified positive influences support social adaptation, general health, and well-being: transformation in play, ingenuity, recreational practices, evaluation, and planning to overcome challenges and cope with negative experiences (Caci et al., 2020; Oettingen and Mayer, 2002). Negative

effects are related to disturbances in personal development and social interaction. The overview of psychological literature on fantasy reveals description of various fantasy contents: constructive, creative, related to positive expectations, pleasant, radical, mundane, frightening, and unpleasant. Researchers (Andrade et al., 2014) outline a range of sensory modalities in mental imagery (vision, sound, taste, smell, touch, bodily sensation and emotion feeling). Findings (Kappes, Oettingen & Pak, 2012; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002) on motivation and self-regulation in mental representations shows that indulging in desired future or dwelling on the reality is not guided by expectations of success and showed intermediate goal commitment. Studies show that mental contrasting of desired feasible feature yields strong goal commitment.

Research findings show conflicting discussion on the role of fantasy in social adaptation. Fantasy proneness is associated with *synesthesia*, *imagery vividness*, and *openness to experience* (Horselenberg et al., 2004; Merckelbach, 2004; Merckelbach, Horselenberg, & Muris, 2001). Reported studies indicate strong connection of fantasy proneness to *absorption* (Glisky et al., 1991; Merckelbach, Horselenberg & Muris, 2001), *dissociation* (Merckelbach, Muris, & Rassin, 1999; Rauschenberger & Lynn, 1995; Kihlstrom, Glisky & Angiulo, 1994), and *positive schizotypal features* (Merckelbach, Muris & Rassin, 1999; Merckelbach & Giesbrecht, 2006). Perspective towards health promotion suggests that fantasy engagement enhances personal development and fosters creativity and problem solving. Fantasy is conceived as temporal disengagement from one’s environment and intentional permeability of real and imaginary remaining beyond the limits of visible material world (Lynn & Rhue, 1986, Merckelbach et al., 2020). Other theoretical trajectories relate fantasy proneness to psychopathology. Empirical literature provide evidence for distinction between adaptive and maladaptive fantasizing based on strong correlation between fantasy proneness and dissociation, absorption, and schizotypy. Studies relies on patients and non-clinical samples (Sánchez-Bernardos et al., 2015; Klinger, Henning, & Janssen, 2009; Sánchez-Bernardos & Avia, 2004; Merckelbach, Otgaar & Lynn, 2021).

Purpose and objectives of the study

Empirical findings on benign effects of fantasy (such as adaptive and self-enhancing psychological functioning) encompass *cognitive* mechanisms and *perceptual* experiences. Reported data shows the

direct and indirect effects of negative *affectivity* on the relationship between fantasy proneness and psychopathology (Rauschenberger & Lynn, 2003). *Motivation* constitutes a key dimension in establishing a sense of meaning and experiencing significance in life. Critical review on the psychological conceptions and experimental analysis on fantasy and involvement in imaginative activities posit a motivational problem regarding the phenomenon's role in human motivation theory. Fantasizing "occurs during different organismic states and its contents is by definition only remotely related to current situation" (Klinger, 1971:229-230). Klinger interprets fantasy as a predisposition to certain mental activity. The American psychologist emphasizes on the potentiality of current contents in the consciousness to utter fantasizing and increase the probability for fantasy engagement as an effect of thematic content (Klinger, 1971:228-239).

The study aims to scrutinize people's reflections on fantasy and sense-making of their own fantasy activity, as well as its regulation and impact on one's life. The main purpose of the research is to present consistent conceptualization of fantasy and subjective experience of imaginative involvement. This endeavor is driven by the ambiguity of fantasy as a construct and the lack of clearly defined association with other concepts. In addressing the latter the research attempts to outline subtle nuances in the meaning structure and define purposes of the phenomenon in various aspect of life. Qualitative research provides mean to gain understanding of phenomenon closer to the nature of the experience of fantasy and subjective meanings of different forms of imaginative activity. This allows us to interpret abstract fields of human knowledge and feeling and to develop empirical model to investigate that fundamental human capacity.

Specific research objectives include interpretation on the distinguished relationships between participant's experiences and intended meanings and analysis of the fantasy meaning structure and discerning boundaries of the phenomenon. Another objective of the study is to examine driving purposes of the fantasy activity. Content analysis discusses differentiations and associations in terms of words subjective references. Phenomenological analysis introduces features of mental contents and experiences in imaginative activity.

Methodology

Participants

Twenty-seven Bulgarian participated in the study: one seven-year-old boy and twenty-six adults, in-

cluding eleven males and fifteen females. The average age ($\bar{x}$) of an adult participant was 42.81 years ($SD=14.84$.) The age distribution of the participants is as it follows: highest number (thirteen) of respondents are between 21-39 years, seven respondents between 39-57 years, those between 57-75 years are six, and one seven-year-old. Participants agreed to take part in the study following a detail description of research procedure. Adult participants provided informed consent for audio-recording, and the boy's parents provided informed consent for his participation.

Methods

A semi-structured interview was used as a data collection method that relies on qualitative and quantitative research approaches. It was employed to obtain knowledge about the structure and function of fantasy. In a research semi-structured interview allows flexibility for the investigator to see patterns or elaborate more on a topic by asking different questions from the initially set structure and order (Naidenova, Dzhamdzhieva, Staevska, 2008).

To conduct an empirical study on the nature of fantasy, based on theories and experimental research, a model of common underlying factors in the conceptualization of fantasy and fantasy proneness (see Appendix 1) was formulated (Klinger, 1971; Singer, 1977; Petkov, 1978; Sánchez-Bernardos and Avia, 2004; Klinger, Henning, & Janssen, 2009; Sánchez-Bernardos, Hernández Lloreda, Avia & Bragado-Alvarez, 2017; Bacon & Charlesford, 2018; Merckelbach, Otgaar & Lynn, 2021). The study aimed at investigating those aspects of meaning that are ambiguous or less elucidated. A primary set of semantic classes was established through clustering similar objects. Seven general categories were created. Initial pool of fixed questions (see Appendix 2) referred to contents within the range of those categories: the essence of the phenomenon of fantasy, tendency in the experience of fantasizing (frequency, source, organization), qualities of the experience in imaginative activity, specific content and themes of fantasy proneness, features of the imaginative content, and functions of fantasy.

Procedure

Participants were invited to share their perceptions and thoughts on the phenomenon of fantasy. They were asked to reflect on the role of fantasy in their lives and the emotional arousal and valence experienced in the imaginative activity. Participants were

asked to elaborate on specific purposes of fantasy involvement and risks of developing negative engagement with certain contents and patterns of fantasy. Participants were invited to comment on similarities and discrepancies in their understanding about fantasy, daydreaming, creativity, and imagination. The questions prompted brief discussions and elicited new topics and questions.

Participants were assured confidentiality, and all first names and family names were replaced by initials in the present paper. Interviews were audio recorded and all verbal data was transcribed into written form using Sonix software. Atlas.ti was used to code, analyze and organize research data.

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) is a qualitative method conducted to identify, analyze and report pattern (themes) within data. Following previously outlined categories, data was organized into meaningful groups, initially coded and collated. Themes across data were determined and transformed into units. Content analysis was conducted to identify words and phrases related to fantasy and imaginative activity. Interpretation of all data involved refinement of what aspects of the data each theme captured and thematic map of the relationships between codes and patterns.

In the process of coding data was organized in meaningful groups with the purpose of developing units of analysis (themes). New patterns were generated by collating codes into potential themes. The latter suggested *different classification* to clear definitions and names for each theme. A *new organization in categories* was introduced (see Table 1) following prominent changes in the ways data was organized. The three-component model of the structure of personal meaning was applied (Reker & Wong, 2012). All data across study was analyzed and interpreted following the three interrelated components of meaning: *cognitive*, *affective* and *motivational*.

The new structure is consistent with conceptualization of global meaning (Reker & Wong, 1988; Reker & Wong, 2012). The cognitive component reflects beliefs and values reflecting the personal significance of fantasy in life. The motivational component concerns purposes of imaginative activity and conditioning reasons. The affective component is associated with arousal, emotions and mental activity (see Table 1).

Results

A total of 297 minutes recorded time, with an average time for an interview of 12 minutes. Following transcription in written form a total number of 33 653 words (26,675 excluding questions) were generated on 129 pages.

Respondents admitted difficulty of articulating inner experiences and most reflected on fantasy for the first time. It prompted private matters and insisted on choosing verbal form to express subjective experiences. Participants' engagement in conveying authentic experiences and earnestness in overcoming former difficulties text were noteworthy. The author wishes to express her sincere gratitude to the contributors of the present research.

Words and Phrases Related to Fantasy

"Imagining is very tempting, sometimes to replace real actions in life, but they still remain in the realm of one's mind (head), so it cannot replace them." (S., 42)

Participants frequently used words and phrases referring to reality, life, feeling, desire, idea, space, and image. "Dream," "create," and "invent" were often followed by collocations with the word "world". Table 2 below presents list of frequently-used words in transcribed texts.

Table 1. Structure of fantasy meaning

Cognition	Affect	Motivation
Essence of fantasy	Affect and bodily reaction	Need to experience
Form and space	Experiencing a state of fantasy	Direction of imagination
Conscious fantasy	Intimacy of experience	Purposes of fantasizing
Consciousness in activity	Excessive fantasy involvement	Functions
Qualities of attention	Content-dependent experience of imaginary	
	Perspective of experiencing fantasy	

Table 2. List of common words and phrases related to fantasy

Words and phrases	word counts
reality (74), real (58), unreal (5); (words defined by the researcher)	137
life, lives, experience, alive, enliven	99
feeling/s; feel; sense; presentiment	83
want (30); desire, desired (26); reluctance (4); wish (1); longing (4)	61
imagine; represent; idea	60
place (36), form (14), space (7), dimension (2)	59
image (17), transform (7), diverse (1), imagined (1), imagine (1); imaginary (1), imagination (24)	52
world (other, beautiful, our, surrounding, whole, different, real, magical, fabulous, inner, Christian, non-existent, material, phantasmal, parallel)	47
different	42
dream/dreaming; daydream; reverie	41
create/recreate (15), invent (14), creativity (4), artistic (8)	41
impossible/impossibility (8); unreal/ unrealized (4), possible/possibility (27)	39
meaning (33), meaningful (1)	34
experience/experiencing/experienced	22
(in, out, my) mind/head/	21
creativity (4), artistic (1), art (4), creativity (4)	13
idea	9
perception/perception/perceive	8

Cognition

Fantasy is most frequently conceived as a form of experiencing the impossible and the unattainable. *“Imagining something that can be, something that will never happen, something that is impossible to happen, or something that can happen, but it is relatively difficult”* (R., 65). To experience the impossible in one’s mind- *“to be invisible, to turn back time, to do things beyond the limits of my body”*

(V., 36); *“to have superpowers”* (M., 7); *“we have superpowers”* (N., 32); *“to take over the world and destroy it as a whole”* (M., 21); *“to achieve, or fail at something impossible, to turn back time”* (K., 42); *“to have an ocean in front of my house in Sofia”* (A., 35). *“Fantasy touches the unreal, while imagination outlines the real”* (N., 62). Some participants grasp fantasy as “recognition that something is impossible to happen in reality” (A., 32), differing from day-dreaming in the peculiarity of its content.

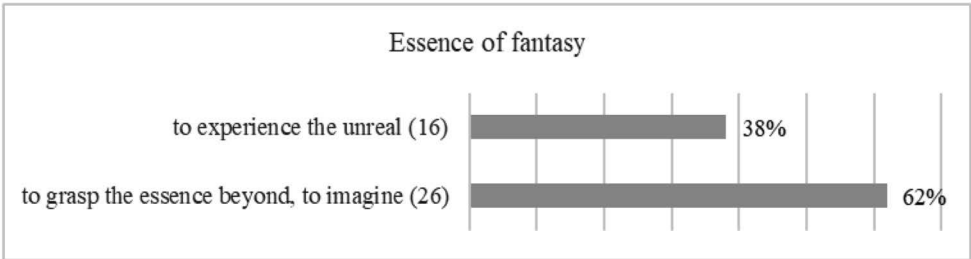


Figure 1. Essence of fantasy

Data analysis indicates that participants grasp differences in terms of fantasy and dream based on the probability of reaching a desired result. Respondents state: *"Fantasy can reach beyond, to be rather peculiar or rather unreal"* (D., 63); *"My fantasy feels like something enchanting"* (F., 21); *"If it is invented, then it is a fantasy"* (E., 36); *"Dreaming is related to some more real and attainable goals. Fantasy has no achievable limits"* (N., 62); *"Part of our fantasies are our dreams, and maybe the ones that have come true are dreams and the ones we have not succeed in remain fantasies"* (G., 36); *"You can dream of something you can never have, right? But when you fantasize, it's as if it's yours."* (E., 53); *"I am able to fantasize about things that I cannot actually do or achieve. While dreaming is the way to strive for attaining certain of my goals that I have set for myself"* (Z., 26); *"You can dream of becoming an astronaut, for example. But at the age of 40-50 dreaming of being an astronaut is unrealistic. This is not a dream, it is a fantasy"* (M., 47); *"Imagination can go crazy, you can fantasize about non-existent things. Children fantasize more about such things, as if it were, and then later the same turn into dreams"* (E., 36); *"While fantasy can be something that doesn't exist at all. To fantasize. Another world that exists only with you. World that is no-where"* (R., 65). In an empirical model of studying motivation function of thinking about the future introduced by Gabriel Oettingen and Doris Mayer (Oettingen & Mayer, 2002) a similar distinction between fantasies and expectations is observed. Positive fantasies embellish the future and seduce people to mentally indulge in desired images regardless of expectations for success based on past experiences and assessment of the probability of occurrence. Positive expectancies consider performance and personal resources and refer to beliefs that desired outcomes should follow striving for success.

Fantasy is also perceived as a sensuous experience. Respondents frequently compare fantasy to a moving picture: *"It's a video. There's sound, there's a picture, there can be music, even, if it's YouTube"* (S., 42). *"Presentiment that is prior to feeling"* (P., 54) appears in responses: *"Between premonition and fantasy there is a thin line"* (M., 49). Erotic fantasies are associated with physiological reactions. Participants described low or high arousal as a pleasant experience related to warmth, comfort, or a perceived tension of the body. One participant comments: *"No, I'm rather static, because this world of imagination and fantasy is so dynamic within a person that there is no need to physically, externally express it"* (N., 62).

Imaginary mode of perception takes man to seeing beyond appearances: *"To detach man from reality, so that they can feel that they are a living man"* (N., 62). The understanding about the source of fantasies is related to personal development and life experiences. *"Fantasy is our product"* (N., 64) and its genesis is *"the person themselves, from the vividness of their inner world, from what they has accumulated as experience in life, from the imagination, from the boundaries that the person themselves has set or not"* (N., 62). *"Enrichment of the world for a person/ This is the fantasy"* (N., 62). Imagination is viewed as the source of vital energy and the essence of human being. *"In the end, every person on this earth, or at least within the teaching of Christianity, have raised and walked their path with fantasies, to begin with the fairy tales and everything most valuable develops from there"* (R., 65).

Personal statements reveal spiritual and mystical sense in imaginative perception: *"part of God, of love"* (R., 37); *"from the nature of everything around us"; "the common between individuals. What relates them and what separates them. Of life and death. The nature of everything"* (S., 27); *"fantasizing accompanies life and somehow... fantasy and life are intertwined in experience"* (Ts., 45); *"Imagination is an outlet for man. A necessity, a need to touch upon some fantastic other dimensions."* (N., 62); *"Sometimes even fantasy turns into some kind of dialogue with a not a living person or people. Or, for example, when you start falling asleep and fantasize about something, your body can react in some way."* (D., 63).

Fantasizing functions as both an escape and a solution to hardships and obstacles in the environment. *"Fantasizing is a way to escape from reality, to imagine some things that we want, that it is not certain whether they will happen"* (G., 36). *"Escape from problems and real life"* (M., 47), *"Fantasy saves us from everyday life, from banality"* (D., 63). Studies on mental stimulations, related to indulging in fantasy and dwelling through mind imageries, shows negative effect on engagement in action towards achievement, self-regulation and motivation (Kappes, Oettingen & Pak, 2012; Oettingen & Mayer, 2002). *"Without fantasy, it would be very boring and difficult for me. So I limit myself in my fantasies because they are not that practical considering the life I live. But I really love fantasizing."* (N., 64). Fantasy provides an outlet for the hardships in imagining fortune outcomes, expressing hope or actually finding creative solutions. *"Imagination is an outlet for man. A necessity, a need to touch some such fantasy, other dimensions"*

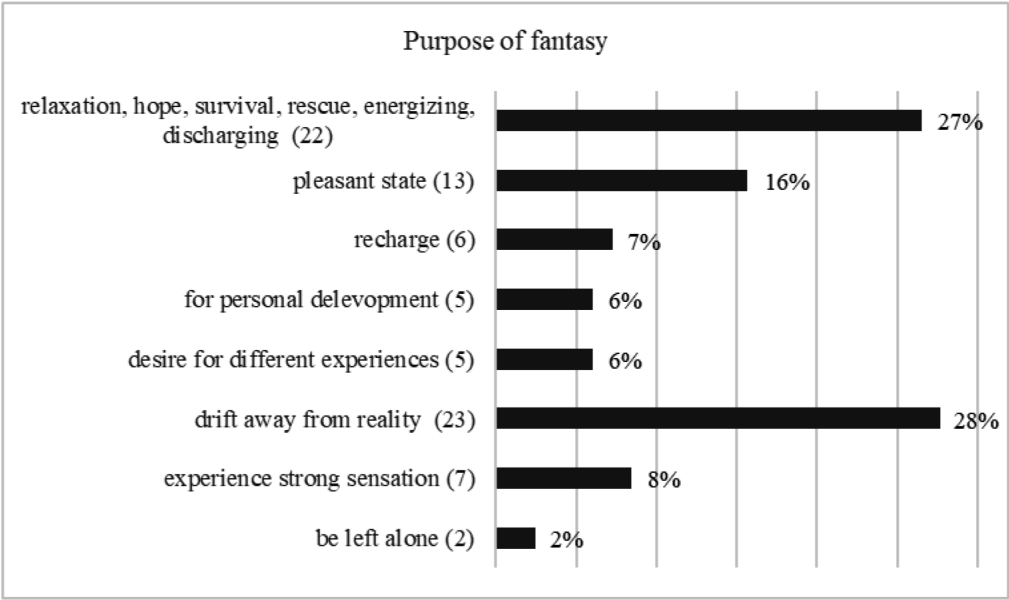


Figure 2. Purpose of fantasy

(N., 62). *“Without fantasy, in my opinion, people will not survive”* (Z., 26). *“Fantasizing acts as a kind of salvation, some brief respite, some peace of mind, some place of yours, intimate, that takes you somewhere else”* (D., 63). Actively harnessing imagination to engage in fantasies for the purposes of management of affect and maintenance of problem-solving activity is beneficial for self-regulation (Taylor et al., 1998).

Data reveals a tendency in participants’ responses towards seeking new experiences and excitement in fantasy. According to the narrative the level of arousal in the organism during imaginative activity, is low. Participants frequently mention low level of consciousness, less awareness for the interaction with the surroundings while fantasizing. Free time and a relaxed mind are leading conditions for indulging in forms of imagination: *“When we have rested and are left alone with ourselves. Then we can relax enough and fantasize”* (G., 36); *“At noon after a good coffee, a good breakfast, in the afternoon, after an afternoon nap, and at any time when there is free time”* (S., 42). The state of gaining peace of mind and pleasure is the expressed purpose of the imaginative activity. *“The more I fantasize, the more I rest, with things that have nothing to do with real life, everyday life”* (A., 36); *“The ability to relax, to achieve goals, to... the ability to relax the mind and the ability to have fun in life, flirt with it and enjoy it more fully”* (R., 37); *“when one rests. Let’s say there are times when you just do nothing. You don’t read, you don’t do, you don’t have any mental or physical activity”* (R., 65).

Two respondents shared that fantasizing occurs spontaneously: *“It’s never orchestrated. Fantasizing comes by itself”* (N., 64); *“I must be driven by something hidden inside me. Some little devil or I don’t know what little thing. A little, little bird, maybe, but.... But that’s where the desire to fantasize comes quite naturally and effortlessly”* (P., 74). In passive fantasy according to K.G. Jung, mental contents (most often visual) appear with no expectation in a passive attitude of the subject representing a certain opposition between conscious and unconscious activity (Jung, 1971). Four participants comment on the state prior to falling asleep or following waking up when they are transported into fantasizing and *“sometimes it even merges with the dream itself”* (N., 32). Physical movement (dance, sports, riding in a vehicle) is transformed into fantasizing for two participants.

“You cannot constantly think about what is happening around you. You have to think of occasionally for what you want to happen, or perhaps you do not want to, but you imagine happening” (L., 42).

“People should fantasize more to realize things that are beyond them and beyond the reality they see” (M., 32 years old). Fantasizing is perceived as another world, vivid and bright, and an ability to see beyond the apparent and imagine further. *“Fantasizing is like living another life, a varied life, not being left solely with what is around you”* (P., 74). *“Fantasizing for me is transporting into another world, outside the mundane, outside the usual, in the creation of which I participate”* (V., 60); *“Imagine something that you really want, but at the given moment, let’s say, might not be within your means.”* (R., 65 years

old). *“Fantasizing is something with which I can imagine things that cannot happen on earth, and I can see them in the future”* (M., 7 years old). Narratives reveal clear delineation in what is imaginary from what is real. Participants cherish the possibility to perceive yourself and the world in a free manner. *“I write down in my mind the possible course of events, I fantasize about their favorable development, or I dream of a reversal where it is not possible”* (V., 36 years old).

Motivation and affect

An interesting trend is documented in experiential states of fantasy. Participants recognize *active* and *passive* sense of agency in imaginings (see Figure 3). As an active agent in experiencing fantasy content, participants perceive themselves as: superhero, legendary soccer player, an Italian gypsy and beach cafe owner, a fairytale princess, being invisible, going back in time, teleporting, or taking over the world. The passive sense of agency is closer to the state of contemplation: *“that I lead another life, in other countries and eras, with other people, but again more like a spectator than a participant”* (V., 60); *“rather like an observer, like a spectator. Let’s say I fantasize that there is an ocean next to my house. I don’t take part in this thing personally, or I fantasize about something completely different, which I’m not even close to at all.”* (A., 36 years old); *“most often I catch myself fantasizing about how our living room will look like and how we are in there. What kind of renovation we have done, my terrace, how will it look”* (N., 32 years old); *“No, I am not included. I just turn them into my own way. I mostly fantasize about real people. I really like to take them as images, create my own images in my head and use these images for some fantasy of mine”* (Z., 26 years old). According to Eric Klinger (1978) positive fantasies can be impulsive or volitional; coherent or incoherent; as well as experienced from

active I-perspective or passive- me. Pleasure is inextricably linked to fantasies, where we mentally enjoy moving smoothly to desire.

Fantasy is frequently reported as a world, space, unreachable and intimate, where you feel and experience various interactions, imageries and sentiments. *“The parallel world of fantasy occupies a large space of man’s inner world, on the territory of the fantasy man dramatize the unhappened/unachieved/unrealized desire”* (V., 36).

During the interviews almost all respondents related fantasizing to their personal longings and desires, *“what you want and can’t have.”* A space opens where a person can role play their desires or be transported to another world. *“To detach man from reality, so that they feel that they are a living man”* (N., 62).

Fantasy is understood as mental activity directed to the future, a *“dress rehearsal for life scenes”* (S., 42). Imaginary brings potential for real action in the environment (Klinger, 1971). *“Part of my planning for the future. It literally allows me to enter a totally different world that would be potential for me”* (N., 32 years old). Data reveals conceptualization as representing and planning the future, *“as a motivation to achieve one’s goals”, “setting goals and conceiving ideas in my mind about what I want to happen and how my life should develop”, “imagining what the future would be like if you realized your plans.”* *“It makes us strive to achieve. Part of our fantasies, that are more real and possible, and help us to develop”* (G., 36 years old). Embedded meanings highlight nuances in treating what is real in imagining: fantasy as a source for actions and ideas towards achieving a goals or as a drive towards reimagining the present.

The longing and desire expressed in fantasy can refer to the past, present, and future: *“some nostalgia for something that I have experienced and I would then like this fantasy to happen again in my future”* (M., 47 years); *“in fantasy, I rather try to experience*

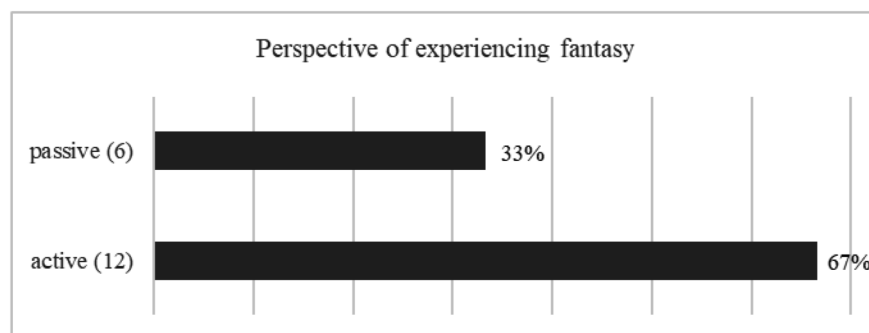


Figure 3. Perspective of experiencing fantasy

reality in a way that it does not happen” (R., 36); “generally how I see myself in the future” (G., 36 years old); “something that I want in the future and I begin to imagine it in some particular details, which do not necessarily actually come true exactly like that” (N., 32 years old); “about what I want it to be, how I can achieve everything, how I work various dream jobs for me” (R., 36). In fantasy, we give “to airy nothing a local habitation and a name” (Singer, 1977:3). Visceral imageries reflect momentary states and concerns, regulate mood, organize experience, accelerate learning, and stimulate the decision-making process and put forward processes and experiences in the self (Klinger et al., 2009).

Seeking experience, a feeling or emotional state, (see Figure 2) is a major purpose according to data: “Some feelings to have. Maybe you should want something and start dreaming about it” (K., 42 years old); “a man sometimes is immersed in these fantasies and it’s as if you were experienced it and it brings you some positive emotion” (E., 53); “related to their best wishes” (D., 63 years old), “to imagine some things we want” (G., 36 years old), “to experience something different and nice” (N., 62 years old), “things you don’t intend to do, but you imagine them as an experience” (N., 32 years old), “the feeling is positive, of something interesting that brings me pleasure and joy” (V., 60 years old), “for pleasant emotions, vacations, excursions” (Ts., 31), “only good feelings and only good emotions” (E., 53). Participants discuss the desire for something unusual, exciting, impossible, or imaginary to happen that is a force to fantasy motivation (Klinger, 1971).

“Well, the most you feel is strong excitement, somehow, you start getting excited. It’s like imagining how these things will happen in real life” (M., 21).

“If there is no feeling, the meaning of the fantasy is lost” (A., 36 years old). Imaginary can provoke different feelings: pleasure, fear, excitement, irrita-

tion, and unpleasantness. “It depends on the imagining, on the fantasy, more or less, its like a movie. It depends on what kind of movie you fell into” (S., 42); “it could be much scarier than what happens next, and it could also be much nicer” (E., 53). “It’s like a fairy tale, like a magical fairy tale. It’s nice! It’s pleasant. Even then, when one realizes that it’s something deceptive, it’s nice” (N., 62). “It can take you to places where you really want to be, but you don’t have the opportunity to achieve it. And it is possible that this will somehow make you sad” (N., 32). “If we fantasize terrible things, it will surely have a negative effect upon us” (G., 36 years old). Desire for emotion puts into perspective that knowing something is experience, a feeling that gives significance and meaning to life (Damasio, 2014; Reker & Wong, 2012).

Fantasy involvement has been associated with a risk of excessive imagining, that negatively affects perception of and interaction with reality. Seclusion, “flying away” from problems, or “giving you the strength to fight this problem” are noted as states of mentally recharging and overcoming hardship in the realm of imaginary.

Data indicates a major trend in the responses related to the desire itself as the motivation to fantasize (see Figure 4). Wanting reflects an active desire for an object and a drive to attain satisfaction (Damasio, 2004). Wanting refers to associating available appetite with an object and seeking to consume and satiate it (Damasio, 2004). Personal desires, needs, longings, and cherished dreams are indicated as the source of energy and direction of fantasizing. “From desire, from wanting it comes”; “to imagine things we want”; “it’s about dreams”; a source of fantasy is “the feeling that makes me understand something”; “from unfulfilled wishes, from future plans”; “fantasizing about what the future would be like if you achieve your plans.”

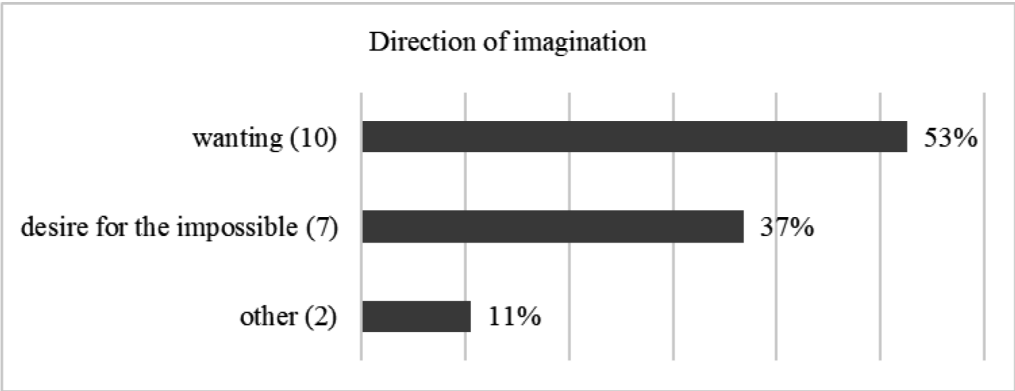


Figure 4. Direction of imagination

Intense emotional experiences, regardless of their valence, can induce imaginative activity. Pursuing new or intensive experiences is the purpose of imagining according to a major part of the participants. Fantasizing as a way to escape aversive environment has been explored in the psychological literature (Rhue & Lynn, 1987; Sánchez-Bernardos and Avia 2004; Muris, Merckelbach, & Peters, 2003). Respondents stated: “when a person is not satisfied with the present and with the reality (in which he found himself or he himself had put himself)” (V., 36 years old); “In case of any deficiencies, in case of shortages. When something is not sufficiently meaningful, engaging, exciting” (M., 32). Positive experiences can trigger mental diversion from perceived reality: “When sometimes I am tense and when I am happy, from one extreme to the other. For me, fantasy is a way to improve your inner state” (M., 47); “some strong emotions”; “great excitement.” Longing serves a dual function in motivation of fantasy. Desire energizes imaginative activity and experiencing desired sensation directs fantasizing (see Figure 5).

Participants expressed difficulty in communicating imaginative experiences due to restrictions in language, difficulty in verbally expressing mental experiences, or reluctance to reveal visceral experiences: “If I could put them into words, I would, but language is a very restricted way to share it with anyone. Words are not enough” (M., 32); “a man cannot in such an interview express everything exactly, in words, express everything they fantasizes about” (E., 53); “I’m always worried if they ask me. I never worry if they don’t ask me.” (P., 54); “per-

haps because I am somehow trying to translate to myself what I just experienced.” (N., 64 years old); “here you already enter some areas that are very personal” (P., 54). A general trend among the respondents is the experience of intimacy regarding the content of fantasizing: “This is a hidden inner world that every person has, somehow very intimate, only theirs” (N., 62). “This world does not find an outlet to the public; rather, it is chambered, private, something like an inner room, an inner place.” (V., 36 years old); “I consciously did not share—they were my worlds and experiences that I kept to myself.” (V., 60); “I generally don’t like to talk about the things I experience internally.” (M., 47).

One participant, who expressed their willingness to share fantasies with others, notes: “I love, I like, it depends on my mood and on the company. Do I think I will be understood and appreciated. But in any case, I want the performance to take place.” (P., 74). Another participant aside from the difficulty, comments that “for me, fantasy is even part of my communication with people, and it’s actually very important, because somehow it allows you to think beyond what you see on a daily basis.” (N., 32 years old). Imaginative contents are described as “indecent”, “scary”, even uncanny, “I can startle someone with my fantasies,” and “sexual”. Participants show a restraint in the open discussion of their fantasies. Back to theory, Freud grasps fantasizing as a substitute for play and a transformation in gaining pleasure. Adults conceal their inner plays and experiences from others, but still experience excitement directed by their own desires and passions (Freud, 1907/1908; Freud, 1991).

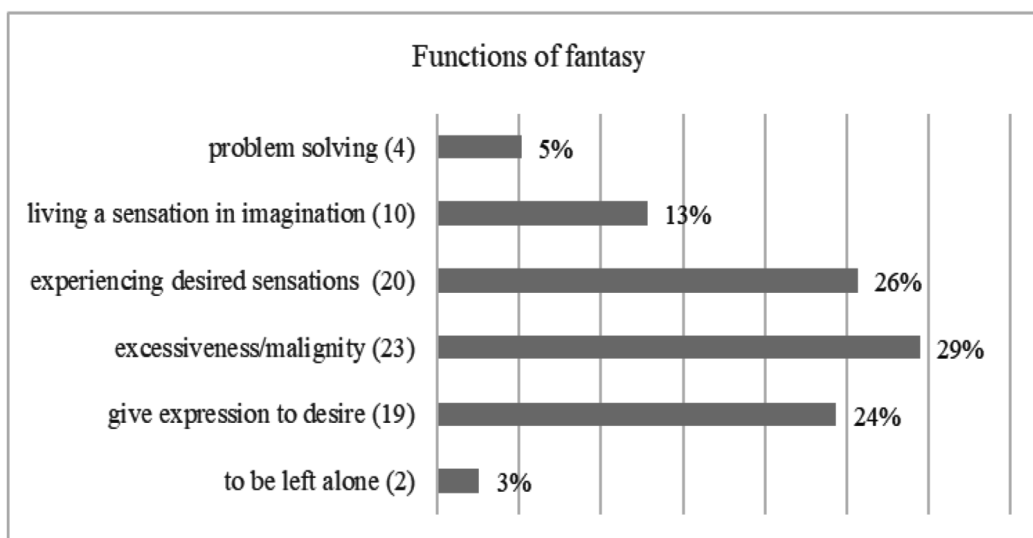


Figure 5. Functions of fantasy

Difficulties in imaginative experiences

In the present study, the reader would come across words and phrases derived from literature fiction. Meanings of “uncanny” (Sigmund Freud, *Das Unheimliche*, 1919) and “fierce” (Yordan Radichkov, “The Fierce Mood,” 1965) were utilized in the interview to ask about the risks in fantasizing for the individual’s mental functioning.

The attitude towards one’s own imaginative activity and that of others is contradictory, particularly when considering an inclination for immersion in excessive imagining (see Figure 6). Respondents reflect on the risks associated with engagement in fantasies that induces unpleasant sensations (fear, disgust, aggression) and posit the need for self-regulation: “I limit myself in my fantasies because I am not that practical about the life I lead” (N., 64 years); “Alluring, enticing, pleasant, beautiful, as long as you know it is what it is, as long as it does not cross any boundaries. To stay only with fantasizing” (M., 32); “I can’t shake off some ridiculous thought, for example about thieves or monsters, no matter how strange” (N., 32); “Something if somehow gets too much into my mind, it also affects how we process it in reality. But, yes, it depends a lot on the fantasy itself and I guess how you feel at that moment.” (S., 27).

“Living in an imaginary world” (R., 65). Mental diversion from reality was linked to psychopathology when respondents emphasized on excessive engagement in fantasy, where it “obsesses over much of your day,” “get lost in fantasy,” “your mind is flooded and we can’t get out of it,” “if we go beyond all measure, like in every action, feeling, thought”. The reported interrelationships with dissociation, absorption, and aspects of schizotypy (Sánchez-Bernardos et al. 2015; Klinger, Henning, & Janssen, 2009; Sánchez-Bernardos & Avia, 2004, Merckelbach, Otgaar & Lynn, 2021) provide grounds for interpretations of the tendency to fantasize within the field of psychopathology.

“If it [fantasizing] conceived in a person who has basically, I don’t know, a mental problem, maybe it would be good if they didn’t get so carried away by the fantasy, but if their thoughts were more earthy and more real, I don’t know, more possible for them in the given situation” (E., 36); “If you fantasize that you can achieve something, but it is very far from your potentials and abilities” (D., 63); “if it is unceasing fantasizing, without any connection with reality, without interacting in any way with the people around us and the objects, then it already becomes yes, quite bad and harmful” (M., 21 years old).

“In our human quest to fulfill our fantasies, we become ferocious, and our fantasy itself is ferocious...the very insistence of man to fulfill his fantasy. People don’t realize that in their insistence on realizing their fantasies, they can hurt other people around them” (Z., 26 years old).

Respondents were invited to discuss the effects of negative fantasy engagement and negative fantasy content on psychosocial functioning. Twenty-five of the twenty-seven participants articulated problems related to social adaptation, mental health. Participant stress on the vulnerability of individuals with a history of mental disorder: “if bordering on pathology”; “when this border is crossed, you start living in such a non-existent world of your fantasies, it’s unpleasant. After all, we live in a material world and it will be difficult.” (R., 65).

Fantasies containing violent, antisocial or uncanny contents are framed as problems: “If we fantasize terrible things, it will certainly have a negative effect on us.” (G., 36); “going to live in a world of continuous nightmares, which exist only in your head, it is also horrible” (R., 65); “There is something uncanny in fantasy, because one is always more inclined to give precedence to one’s fears in a fantasy than to pleasant emotions. But by presumption, for me, fantasy should bring good feelings.” (M., 47); “sometimes fantasy gets in the way, because it inserts into your mind quite negative, very real ideas

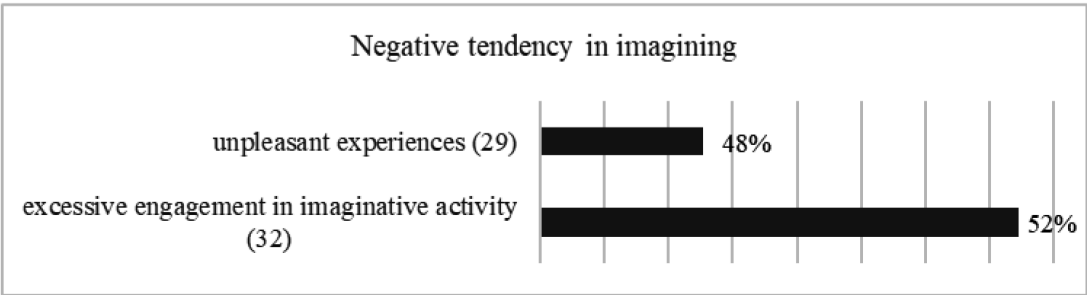


Figure 6. Negative tendency in imagining

about things that only burden you mentally, without actually knowing that this will ever happen." (N., 32). Sharing personal fantasies was cited as a cause of harm by one participant: "What you get from others like disapproval and what you don't get after you've done it" (P., 74).

Four participants indicated that persistent fantasies could harm those who do not share them: *"If we are not quite sure what we are fantasizing about. What heavy burden it carries with it. And it's all a matter of perception. A certain thing may be harmful for me and the same thing may not be harmful for someone else. It depends on how we perceive our inner reality and accordingly how we present this reality. And whether we can survive in our own fantasies in the end."* Two participants do not agree that fantasizing can be malignant: *"No, it cannot, because fantasizing is something you can imagine the future with."* (M., 7)

A significant portion of respondents emphasized the necessity to regulate the act of fantasizing: "if it is excessive," "if we lose the measure," "you feel that you have no control over them," "it helps a lot, but we have to do it in moderation," *"If this fantasizing does become a huge part of... then it obsesses a large part of the day and actually blinds you to reality, because fantasy and reality are two different things"* (R., 37 years old); *"If it's excessive for sure. Because we still need to go back to where we are now, get firmly on our feet, have a real idea of hardships, goals, and absolutely all the obstacles that are until we get, until we achieve these goals"* (F., 21 years old).

Discussion and limitations of the study

The initial set of fixed questions imposes limitations on the range of themes, words, phrases and ways of asking about respondents' understanding of the phenomenon. The structured pool of questions does not suggest variations in articulating fantasizing (fantasy and imagine). Examining whether the perception of fantasizing changes with the use of specific words and phrases would be beneficial.

Researcher's personal biases and idiosyncrasies could influence data analysis. The author is aware of this limitation on the quality of research and follows rigidly the introduced model of analysis to offer critical evaluation in her interpretations. Another limitation is the sample size. Increasing the number of respondents and broadening the scope of groups would facilitate drawing more specific conclusions.

Another limitation comes from respondents' difficulty in articulating mental experiences from

the realm of imagination. Active censorship or intentional diversion in meaning affects reported meaning, experiences and realities. Despite discussed limitations in analysis and data collection, the study aims to get closer to people's everyday experience in fantasizing and identify verbal expression that consistent understanding of fantasy to scientific knowledge. This is the first study on fantasy and fantasy proneness in Bulgarian psychological literature and the first attempt to discover recurring themes and relationships between patterns in consistent conceptualization of the phenomenological experience.

Conclusion

The overview of existing psychological research on fantasy shows inconsistent conceptualization of fantasy and scattered literature on fantasy-related phenomena. Further investigation on the nature of fantasy is needed to clarify existing associations with adaptive and maladaptive functioning. Analysis on subjective experience in imaginative activity shows distinct features in the meaning structure of fantasy related to cognition, affect and engagement in fantasy behavior.

The qualitative analysis explores components identified in previous scientific research on creative experience and fantasy proneness. Fantasy is related to active and passive sense of agency in imaginings and self-regulation in fantasy response. Imaginative activity is determined by desire and excitement in experiencing the intangible.

Nearly a century ago, Sigmund Freud in his late reflections on the meaning of faith keeps a reasonable account for mind that is "only a little bit of nature and the rest seems to be able to get along very well without it" (Freud, 1930). Contemporary science thought still struggles to reconcile views on human knowledge and human nature (Asma, 2017). It is within the dynamic interrelation of living organism and its environment that a sense of personal meaning and purpose is perceived in one's life. One participant made a remark: *"Nature itself is a fantasy. And only in collision, she teaches you to fantasize. But it's not in the way we fantasize; it's the way she fantasizes. Nature acts."* (P., 54). Man in their effort to make reasonable sense and predict the circumstances of life, transforms reality into a fantasy and, in doing so, man acts their place in universe in an attempt to reconcile discrepancies.

„The question is not what belief is more pleasing or more comfortable or more advantageous to life, but of what may approximate more closely to the puzzling reality that lies outside us “,

Sigmund Freud to Oskar Pfister, 7th of February 1930

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APPENDIXES

Appendix 1. Multidimensional concepts of fantasy proneness and fantasy

Researchers	Dimensions in fantasy proneness			Measures
Wilson & Barber, Lynn & Rhue & Merckelbach	Fantasy Proneness			ICMI (Wilson & Barber, 1983)
Sánchez-Bernardos and Avia (2004)	taps clarity and vividness of imagery	fantasy as a way to escape boredom	make believe and pretend play	CEQ (Merckelbach, Horselenberg, & Muris, 2001)
Klinger, Henning, & Janssen, 2009	reflects vivid, compelling mental imagery; weakened boundaries between fantasy and reality and parapsychological beliefs (relates to psychological disorders and professional treatment)		imaginativeness and enjoyment of make-believe, daydreaming, and others’ imaginative narratives (largely unrelated to psychopathology)	ICMI (Wilson & Barber, 1983)
Sánchez-Bernardos, Hernández Lloreda, Avia & Bragado-Alvarez (2015)	hidden nature of intense and vivid images; daydreaming; identifying with somebody else imagined, fantasizing as a way to escape boredom		developmental antecedents of pretense and make-believe activities; bizarre beliefs	CEQ (Merckelbach, Horselenberg, & Muris, 2001)
Fantasy- new measures				
Plante, Reysen, Groves, Roberts & Gerbasi, 2017	Positive fantasy engagement- beneficial aspects of fantasy engagement		Negative fantasy engagement- reflecting maladaptive aspects of fantasy	Fantasy engagement scale (Plante et al., 2017)
Weibel, Martareli, Haberli, & Mast, 2018	Creative fantasy- using fantasy to create new ideas		Imaginative fantasy- vivid imaginings, absorption in imageries and daydreaming	Fantasy Questionnaire (Weibel et al., 2017)

Appendix 2.**List of questions and categories**

- essence of fantasy:

1. What is the essence of fantasizing for you?
2. What is the role of fantasy in life?

- *tendency in the experience of fantasy*
(frequency, source, organization):

3. Do you tend to fantasize, and when does this occur?

4. What circumstances lead you to fantasize?
5. What are the origins of your fantasies?

- *qualities of the experience in*
imaginative activity:

6. What feelings does fantasizing give?
7. Have you ever experienced a physical reaction while fantasizing? If so, please describe.

8. Do you express yourself through fantasizing? If so, please share how?

- *content/themes of fantasies:*

9. Could you please share what do fantasize about?

10. What themes most commonly trigger your fantasizing?

- *features of the imaginative content:*

11. When you imagine something, is it typically visual, auditory, textual, intuitive, or other?

12. Do you encounter difficulties discussing your fantasies? If so, what are they?

- *functions of fantasy:*

13. Does fantasizing have a positive effect on life?

14. Can fantasizing be detrimental?