

Interpreting the Previous Research Findings Relating to Female Sexual Response

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Disclosures: all research funded from author's own private resources.

Acknowledgments: with thanks to my husband Peter for his technical and moral support as well as to my loyal followers on social media for their tireless encouragement over many years.

18 **Abstract**

19 **Background:** The research to date includes invalid assumptions about female sexual response
20 and needs to be reinterpreted.

21 **Aim:** To identify the erroneous assumptions that have been made by researchers and to suggest
22 alternative interpretations of previous findings.

23 **Method:** A new research approach reinterprets previous research findings to support a more
24 realistic view of female sexual response. This paper attempts to answer the following questions:

25 What can we learn from the previous research?

26 What methods have been used?

27 What are the issues with each method?

28 What assumptions have researchers made?

29 What can we deduce from the reaction to the findings?

30 What gaps are there in the research to date?

31 **Strengths and Limitations:** This approach provides a description of sexuality that reflects the
32 reality. However, men's interest in female sexuality and women's corresponding lack of interest
33 means that significant work is required to update current beliefs about female sexual response.

34 **Conclusion:** Some researchers have ignored the impact of sexual politics on survey results
35 while others have assumed that women should naturally orgasm from intercourse.

36 **Keywords:** female sexual response, sex research, female masturbation, intercourse.

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48 **Introduction**

49 Sigmund Freud (1905) invented the term **vaginal orgasm** from intercourse, which he proposed
50 was preferable to the **clitoral orgasms** women enjoyed from masturbation. Although male
51 orgasm relies on consistent penile stimulation, the different female anatomy involved, did not
52 strike him (or anyone else) as a contradiction. No one thought it inappropriate for a man to
53 define women's sexuality. Neither were women motivated to define their own sexual function.
54 Even though for most of history women were not thought to be capable of orgasm, researchers
55 now assume that every woman experiences regular and frequent sexual response. The roles in
56 intercourse are distinct: the male role is proactive, requiring an erection to initiate intercourse,
57 while the female role is passive and involves cooperating with male initiative. Despite these
58 differences, it is assumed that women should orgasm from intercourse simply because men do.
59 There are very few individuals with the courage to research sexual response. The brave few
60 who have done so, have had their conclusions ridiculed, rejected or ignored. Masturbation has
61 been identified as the key activity where women enjoy a specific response from self-pleasuring.
62 The research reveals that women talk of experiencing more diffuse sensual and emotional
63 pleasure with a lover. This contrast in the description of female sexual response is naturally
64 hugely unpopular with men, who rely on intercourse to satisfy their sexual needs, but also with
65 many women who prefer lovemaking to explicit genital stimulation. As a result, research into
66 female sexual response is only welcomed when it promotes intercourse, which is acceptable to
67 men (as the most erotic act) and to women (as evidence of male admiration and commitment).

68 **Alfred Kinsey highlighted the role of the clitoris**

69 Alfred Kinsey's research, with a separate report dedicated to men (1948) and women (1953),
70 was broad in scope. Kinsey and his three male co-authors held private interviews with over ten

71 thousand people: 5,300 men and 5,940 women. No women contributed to the research in a way
72 that justified them being named as a co-author. Interviewees were asked to estimate their
73 orgasm frequency in various scenarios. Anonymity was guaranteed. Kinsey used a statistical
74 sampling technique that made his work representative of the US white population at the time.

75 I first came across Alfred Kinsey's work as part of my own research and was reassured to find
76 that his conclusions accorded almost exactly with my own:

77 (1) Men are much more sexually responsive than women;
78 (2) Men typically want higher intercourse frequencies than women do; and
79 (3) Female sexual response is most explicitly described by women's masturbation techniques.

80 Kinsey's findings revealed a range of responsiveness for individuals, with women being much
81 less responsive than men. Kinsey realised that even these figures for female responsiveness
82 were overstated due to emotional and political pressure. Women's orgasm frequencies from
83 activity alone or with another woman were much lower than those reported with a man. There
84 was a strong correlation between a couple's intercourse frequencies and the man's
85 responsiveness. While women's orgasm claims had little impact on intercourse frequencies.

86 Due to the male instinctive desire for a female response to intercourse (male expectations for a
87 response are reflected in pornography), women think they should orgasm from intercourse. If
88 researchers ask women whether they orgasm from intercourse, the question implies that it is
89 possible. Some women will always say "yes" despite the lack of logic and research evidence.
90 Despite never being validated against a definition of what sexual responsiveness involves,
91 women's orgasm claims have acquired credibility simply from being recorded by researchers.

Masters and Johnson focused solely on intercourse

In 1966, William Masters and Virginia Johnson carried out research by observing couples who were willing to engage in intercourse under laboratory conditions. They selected only couples where the woman reported having orgasms from intercourse, resulting in a small sample that could never represent the average couple. Female sexual response was assessed by recording physiological changes during copulation, rather than interviewing the women. By focusing purely on physiological changes, Masters and Johnson omitted the psychological impact of the activity. Sexual arousal may describe physical changes, tumescence for example, but it may also describe a state of mental excitation. This approach helped to equate the male and the female experience but is, scientifically speaking, an incomplete description of sexual response.

A symbiotic relationship does not necessarily provide the same rewards for both parties. For example, a carnivore cannot afford compassion for the herbivore it eats to survive. Similarly, due to sex drive a man has little concern for how a woman feels about an act of impregnation. The flight or fight scenario, faced by the herbivore can be likened to the threat faced by a woman who is approached by a male intent on intercourse. She may welcome the contact or she may not. Either way, measuring women's subconscious and instinctive physiological reactions cannot logically be equated to the conscious mental arousal a man experiences.

Masters and Johnson proposed a four-stage linear model of sexual response: **Desire** (libido or excitement), **Arousal** (sometimes called plateau), **Orgasm** and **Resolution**. Their research has been popular because it defines female sexual response in terms of intercourse. The research also equated vaginal lubrication to male arousal, defined by an erect penis. Vaginal lubrication facilitates intercourse and hence reproduction but is not evidence of conscious mental arousal.

Shere Hite talked of the clitoris and masturbation

In 1976, Shere Hite circulated anonymous questionnaires through women's magazines as part of her doctorate research. She received over 3,000 replies but her sample was not statistical and therefore was not representative of the average woman. However, Hite's work gave women a voice because many replies to her explicit questions were documented in her book. The women admitted that without anonymity, they would never have had the courage to reply honestly.

By asking women a long list of detailed questions about sexual response, Hite was likely to attract women who masturbate because orgasms that arise from masturbation are described more explicitly. She found high rates of masturbation (82% of the women in her sample reported masturbating) and low rates of orgasm from intercourse alone. Only 30% of her sample said they had regular orgasms from intercourse without additional clitoral stimulation.

Like Kinsey, Hite found that women's sexual satisfaction had nothing to do with orgasm claims but depended on emotional rewards. Hite (1976) noted "... there was no correlation with frequency of orgasm: women who did not orgasm with their partners were just as likely to say they enjoyed sex as women who did". (p. 420) Since she did not conduct personal interviews with her respondents, Hite could not assess women's experience of sexual response. When asked about the anatomy involved in their presumed orgasms with a lover, women refer to the vagina or clitoris based on their level of sexual knowledge, which usually comes from a man.

By confirming that female orgasm is most easily achieved alone, Hite's research reassured women who masturbate. However, she also implied that other women orgasm with a lover, leading women to feel that they were missing out on a significant experience. Despite this, no further research has been conducted to establish the incidence of orgasm within the population, and yet female orgasm is assumed to be common. Given the rejection of research promoting

137 clitoral stimulation (as proposed by Kinsey and Hite), it can be concluded that (1) few women
138 masturbate and (2) few women orgasm from oral or manual clitoral stimulation with a partner.

139 **The G-spot returned to the favourite: intercourse**

140 The G-spot was a specific area within the vagina that was believed to cause female orgasm.
141 This idea gained significant popularity and has been presented as an established fact rather than
142 a theory. However, Andrea Burri (2010) found no evidence to support the G-spot's existence.
143 She was surprised that the original research had relied on such small sample sizes (fewer than
144 30 women worldwide) to propose a solution that was presented as if it benefits every couple.

145 Theories like the G-spot try to validate the belief that women orgasm from intercourse. But this
146 overlooks the mystery surrounding female orgasm. It also ignores the direct techniques women
147 use to masturbate. Masters and Johnson suggested that women orgasm from intercourse
148 because the clitoral glans is pulled by the thrusting penis. Alternatively, women are believed to
149 orgasm because the thrusting penis stimulates the clitoris through the vaginal walls. Given men
150 need direct stimulation for orgasm, it is illogical to try to justify indirect stimulation for women.

151 Since Freud, the contradiction between female masturbation techniques and the stimulation of
152 intercourse has been clear. Kinsey confirmed the efficacy of women's masturbation techniques
153 and the role of the clitoris in achieving orgasm. His conclusion led to the recommendation that
154 men should add clitoral stimulation to their foreplay. By the time of Masters and Johnson, it
155 was known that the penis and the clitoris develop from the same embryonic organ. Researchers
156 focus on anatomy and physical stimulation, overlooking or ignoring mental arousal entirely.

157 But if intercourse was the means of women achieving orgasm all along, it is difficult to explain
158 the excitement over Kinsey's revelation that women are capable of orgasm. Heterosexuals
159 would not need to be told about female orgasm by scientists if it occurred with a lover. Couples

would have discovered it for themselves. Society favours intercourse because it satisfies male needs and leads to reproduction. Female masturbation and therefore female orgasm are rare.

Kaplan and Basson talked of emotional responses

It is difficult to see how anyone can solve a problem they claim never to have experienced. Nevertheless, sex therapists Helen Kaplan (1979) and Rosemary Basson (2000) treated women for lack of sexual desire and arousal. They rejected Masters and Johnson's sexual response model, finding that women did not identify with the male experience. Helen Kaplan's three-phase model including **desire, excitement and orgasm** was helpful to therapists who most often treat women for lack of desire. Although male sex drive may cause a woman to feel sexually desirable, the emotional reassurance of being needed does not equate to a sex drive.

Proposing theoretical models is easy. It is much more problematic to prove that women's emotional responses can be equated to men's sexual urges. Basson (2000) suggested: "The rewards of emotional closeness—the increased commitment, bonding, and tolerance of imperfections in the relationship—together with an appreciation of the subsequent well-being of the partner all serve as the motivational factors that will activate the cycle next time." (p. 54) Suggesting that relational rewards (arising from pleasing a lover) equate to sex drive also ignores the evidence from female masturbation, where women obtain erotic rewards, including arousal and orgasm. Basson confirmed that orgasm is not essential for women's satisfaction with a lover. Yet sexologists continue to define female sexual dysfunction in terms of orgasm.

Most men are more interested in maximising intercourse frequencies than in their partner's orgasm. A man may enjoy his arousal from foreplay or use it to trigger vaginal lubrication, which facilitates intercourse and increases his pleasure. Men misinterpret this lubrication as conscious arousal rather than as a physiological response. Despite the evidence of men hassling women for sex, men feel humiliated by the idea that women feel obligated to offer intercourse.

Men dislike admitting their emotional dependence on women. “Furthermore, desire for sex is not always the primary motive for engaging in sex; women describe a range of personal (e.g. increasing self-esteem) and interpersonal (e.g. increasing connection with partner; feeling obligated) reasons for engaging in partnered sex.” (Thomas & Gurevich, 2021, p. 84)

Kinsey concluded that women’s orgasm claims make no difference to intercourse frequencies while Hite suggested that women enjoyed intercourse regardless of orgasm. Today high levels of female sexual dysfunction indicate that women do not want the same intercourse frequencies as men. Therapists have also concluded that women have sex for emotional rather than erotic reasons. We have finally confirmed findings that were rejected decades ago but no one has given Kinsey, Hite and many others credit for having already drawn the same conclusions.

Insisting on a need for anyone’s orgasm is unhelpful

Kinsey put the spotlight on orgasm at a time when women were just starting to assert their social, political and sexual equality with men. The money to be made from selling sex to men thrives on the portrayal of proactively sexual women, and it has been assumed that women agree with this image of their sexuality. However, most women continue to value the emotional aspects of their relationships. Despite men placing little importance on their own orgasm from sexual activity with a partner, it is possible that the discovery that some women masturbate to orgasm has led to the misconception that orgasm is vital to women’s satisfaction with a lover.

Comparing the responsiveness of the sexes implies that women are deficient. “... whenever physical contacts or psychologic stimuli had led to orgasm, there was rarely any doubt of the sexual nature of the situation, [...] For these reasons, the statistical data [...] have been largely concerned with the incidences and frequencies of sexual activity that led to orgasm. The procedure may have overemphasized the importance of orgasm”. (Kinsey et al, 1953, p. 510)

207 Kinsey found that male responsiveness slowly declines with age but even at age sixty it exceeds
208 average female responsiveness, which varies little during a woman's life. The decline in male
209 responsiveness explains why intercourse frequencies decrease over time. Kinsey also found
210 men are more promiscuous than women. Today couples are not told these facts even when they
211 would be reassured to know that mismatched sexual desire is common. The goal of promoting
212 intercourse seems to justify the rejection of findings regardless of the lack of research evidence.

213 When I sought answers from therapists about why masturbation is so much more erotically
214 rewarding than intercourse, no one mentioned either Alfred Kinsey's or Shere Hite's work.
215 Sexologists continue to focus on women's role of responding to male needs rather than
216 acknowledge that women might be capable of enjoying their own responsiveness. As a woman
217 who has masturbated to orgasm all her adult life, I am familiar with sexual response. I am also
218 confident to talk about enjoying sex play and eroticism with a lover. Yet my experience is still
219 categorised as dysfunctional just because I do not orgasm from the stimulation a man provides.
220 We must differentiate between a woman's sexual role and how she enjoys her responsiveness.

221 **Conclusion**

222 (1) Kinsey's research inadvertently resulted in women's unsubstantiated claims of orgasms
223 from intercourse marginalising the **more convincing experience of female masturbation.**

224 (2) When proposing their theories for how indirect clitoral stimulation might cause female
225 orgasm from intercourse, scientists ignore **women's more direct masturbatory techniques.**

226 (3) The assumption that every woman is familiar with orgasm has led to female orgasm being
227 defined in terms of **emotional rewards with a lover** rather than by erotic responsiveness.

228 (4) By classifying women who do not orgasm from intercourse as dysfunctional, **the**
229 **experiences of women who enjoy their own responsiveness are excluded from sexology.**

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