

How Should Researchers Describe Female Sexual Desire?



A Methodological Critique of Research on Female Sexual Dysfunction
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Background:

- Recently, the DSM V produced a new diagnosis, “female sexual interest/arousal disorder.” The diagnosis collapsed desire and arousal, previously understood as separate constructs, into a single, overlapping category.
- The inquiry focused on the extent to which the theoretical unification of arousal and desire was justified.
- The current work argued for the use of discourse analysis when defining female sexual desire.

Background: Criteria A of the diagnosis for female sexual interest/ arousal disorder contains six items, three of which must be met. These criteria are:

- (1) Absent/reduced interest in sexual activity
- (2) Absent/reduced sexual/erotic thoughts or fantasies
- (3) No/reduced initiation of sexual activity, and is not receptive to a partner’s attempts to initiate
- (4) Absent/reduced sexual excitement/pleasure during sexual activity
- (5) Absent/reduced sexual interest/arousal in response to any internal or external sexual/erotic cues
- (6) Absent/reduced genital and/or non genital physical changes during sexual activity

Research Questions: To what extent was the unification of desire and arousal in “female sexual interest/ arousal disorder” based on rigorous scientific reasoning? How should sexual desire be studied?

Method:

- Analysed the literature cited as evidence for the argument, put forward by the DSM V workgroup, that arousal and desire are undifferentiated in women’s subjective experiences.
- Critiqued methodologies that drew theoretically significant conclusions about sexual desire, yet disproportionately focused on sexual arousal
- Argued for discursive analysis as an alternative epistemological approach to female sexual desire and arousal

Example Critique:

- The DSM V workgroup cited, “Turning on and turning off: A focus group study of the factors that affect women’s sexual arousal” (Graham, Sanders, Milhausen, & McBride, 2004)
- Topics explored: (1) sexual arousal and its components, (2) sexual interest and sexual arousal, (3) factors that enhance or inhibit sexual arousal. The majority of focus group sessions were spent on no. 3.
- Study Conclusion: sexual desire and arousal are undifferentiated in women’s subjective experience
- Critiques: The focus of the study was arousal, not desire; Sexual “interest” was used instead of “desire”; Many subjects identified a partner’s sexual desire as an arousal cue, indicating knowledge of arousal and desire as separate constructs.

Discursive Analysis: According to this approach, self-report data is not a transparent artifact of female sexuality. Rather,

- Self-report data reflects discourses. Discourses are values, beliefs and cultural practices through which perceptions and experiences are interpreted.

Female Sexuality: Discourses

- Sex is taught in schools as risky, leading to pregnancy, disease. Abstinence, marital sex and heterosexuality are normative (Fine & McClelland, 2006)
- Women are liberated and can freely pursue sex and unlimited pleasure (Gill, 2008)
- Women are sexually passive, and experience desire in the context of romantic love (Hird & Jackson, 2005)
- Sex is a form of relationship maintenance; Sex is a form of exercise and personal care; Sex is a form of economy exchange, of getting what one wants (Brown-Bowers, Gurevich, Vasilovsky, Cosma & Matti, 2015)

Conclusions:

- The theoretical unification of female arousal and desire is not justified.
- Research into female sexual desire must account for multiple and contradictory cultural discourses of female sexuality that shape self-reports and disclosure in research settings