

THE COMPLEXITY OF FEMALE SEXUAL DESIRE

The experience of sexual desire is unique to each individual (Goldhammer & McCabe, 2011). Some describe desire as a physical sensation, while others highlight the emotional and psychological elements of desire. Many researchers have observed that women's desire is dependent on interpersonal factors, such as intimacy and communication, while men's desire is more likely to be felt as a spontaneous urge and biologically focused. Theories of sexual desire and arousal have often assumed men's experiences as the norm, which can lead to a view that women experience lower levels of desire when compared to men. Research has shown that while women's experiences of sexual desire are often distinct from men's experiences, desire remains a powerful and important component of female sexuality. This issue of Check the Research will explore the concept of female sexual desire, and will discuss how women themselves describe their experiences of desire.

MODELS OF HUMAN SEXUAL RESPONSE

Traditional models of sexual response reflect a linear approach to desire and arousal (Wood, Koch, & Mansfield, 2006). These models assume that sexual response proceeds from one stage to another in a pre-defined sequential order. For example, Masters and Johnson developed a four stage model of sexual response: excitement, plateau, orgasm and resolution. The first stage, excitement, is characterized by spontaneous sexual thoughts or urges and would correspond to what is commonly referred to as desire. Helen Singer Kaplan proposed a three stage model of sexual response with desire as the first stage, followed by excitement and then orgasm. Canadian researcher Rosemary Basson (2001, 2005) believes that linear models do not reflect the reality of many women's sexual response, and has proposed that non-linear intimacy-based models more accurately describe the female experience of desire and arousal. This approach recognizes that female desire can often be rooted in a need for intimacy rather than from physical arousal, and that some women experience arousal first and then desire, while others experience desire and then arousal. Basson's research (cited in Wood, Koch, & Mansfield) indicates that intimacy (e.g., respect, consideration, warmth, physical affection, communication) is the primary contributor to sexual desire in women.

WHAT IS SEXUAL DESIRE?

Sexual desire is usually identified as an interest in, or a drive to engage in, sexual activity (Regan, 1999). Sexual desire has also been called an urge, craving or appetite, characterized by sexual thoughts, images, fantasies or feelings. Some identify desire as an innate, biological drive that is influenced by hormones such as testosterone, estrogen, progesterone and prolactin. The conceptualization of desire as a primarily biological event can lead to a reliance on biomedical interventions when addressing problems related to sexual desire in men and women. Taking a more integrated and balanced perspective, some researchers argue that desire is shaped by an interplay of biological, cultural, socioeconomic, political and relational factors (Toman & Diamond, 2001; Wood, Koch, & Mansfield, 2006).

“SEXUAL DESIRE IS COMMONLY DEFINED AS A SUBJECTIVE, PSYCHOLOGICAL EXPERIENCE OR STATE THAT CAN BE UNDERSTOOD BROADLY AS AN INTEREST IN SEXUAL OBJECTS OR ACTIVITIES, OR AS A WISH, NEED, OR DRIVE TO SEEK OUT SEXUAL OBJECTS OR TO ENGAGE IN SEXUAL ACTIVITIES.”

(Regan, 1999, p. 2)



“WE MAINTAIN THAT NEITHER A PURELY BIOLOGICAL NOR A PURELY SOCIOCULTURAL APPROACH CAN ENCOMPASS THE COMPLEXITY OF SEXUAL DESIRE AND THUS NEITHER IS FULLY SATISFYING ON ITS OWN. SEXUAL DESIRES ARE ALWAYS EMBEDDED IN PARTICULAR SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXTS... AND ALWAYS EMBEDDED IN PARTICULAR BIOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTS...”

(Toman & Diamond, 2001, p.34)

WOMEN'S EXPERIENCES OF DESIRE

When asked what desire means to them, women's responses reveal a variety of factors that affect their sexual experiences. Goldhammer and McCabe (2011) surveyed 20 heterosexual women, ranging in ages from 20 to 61. Women were asked about their personal experiences and definitions of desire. Participants characterized desire in various ways. Some spoke of an uncontrollable, “overwhelming passion” while others described desire more based in the mind than in physical urges. Desire could also involve both physical and emotional components, with physical sensations accompanied by a need for intimacy. Some noted that desire and arousal occurred simultaneously and could not be separated.

“I PERCEIVE [SEXUAL DESIRE] AS BEING AN OVERWHELMING PASSION, SOMETHING THAT IS NOT NECESSARILY CONTROLLABLE OR SOMETHING THAT YOU THINK ABOUT. IT'S SOMETHING VERY EMOTIONAL.”

(Study participant, 29 yrs. old, partnered 2 years cited in Goldhammer & McCabe, 2011, p.23)

“I THINK THAT [SEXUAL DESIRE] CAN BE A COMBINATION OF EVERYTHING. I THINK IT COULD BE A PHYSICAL THING; WANTING TO BE PLEASURED PHYSICALLY AND SEXUALLY. BUT IT COULD ALSO BE ANOTHER THING DEEPER; THAT YOU WANT TO BE CLOSE TO SOMEONE. SO EMOTIONALLY YOU MIGHT WANT TO BE INTIMATE. SO I GUESS IT'S GOT BOTH PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL PARTS.”

(Study participant, 23 yrs. old, partnered 2 yrs., cited in Goldhammer & McCabe, 2011, p. 23)

A recent Canadian survey of 20 women, aged 18 to 29, posed the question “What does sexual desire mean to you?” (Murray, Sutherland & Milhausen, 2012). During the course of the study it was apparent that women used different words to describe the concept of desire. When talking about desire, some women referred to sexual frequency, sexual thoughts, passion, arousal and feeling turned on. The authors note that the range of synonyms for desire points to the complexity of the concept for many women. The research showed that women's desire was not constant and tended to follow a pattern of highs and lows, dependent on relationship and other contextual factors.

“FOR ME THE INTIMACY IS IMPORTANT TO DESIRE. AND I THINK INTIMACY COMES WITH TIME...THE STABILITY AND THE INTIMACY



AND THE FAMILIARITY AND THAT REALLY DEEP KNOWLEDGE OF A PERSON IS SEXY AND PASSIONATE FOR ME.”

(Study participant, 21 yrs. old, cited in Murray, Sutherland & Milhausen, 2012. P.7)

LOSS OF DESIRE

Studies have identified poor body image, a partner’s sexual difficulties, and a lack of respect in relationships, as factors that have been linked to a loss of sexual desire (Wood, Koch & Mansfield, 2006). An Australian online survey (McCabe & Goldhammer, 2012) of 741 heterosexual women found that those who experienced feelings of depression had low levels of responsive sexual desire, indicated concern about this lack of desire, and reported that their personal relationships were not satisfying. Women who described themselves as obese had lower levels of sexual desire. As well, the more sexual problems a woman reported, the more likely she was to decline or avoid sex with partners (McCabe & Goldhammer).

Sims and Meana (2010) examined the reasons for loss of desire in a study of 22 married women (26-40 yrs.) in the U.S. Women who self-reported a loss of sexual desire for their partners were recruited for the survey. While many of the women valued the security and closeness of their relationships, they also indicated that familiarity and comfort had led to “efficient but boring sex” (Sims & Meana, p.376). Sexual desire was adversely affected by factors such as familiarity, the institutionalization of the relationship and de-sexualized roles. A lack of spontaneity, romance, and excitement, and the demands of day to day married life, were all mentioned as reasons for loss of desire. The authors note that women’s sexual desire was not always dependent on the quality of intimacy in committed relationships and while intimacy is an important precursor to desire for many women, it can also lead to diminished desire for others.

“THERE'S A COMFORT THERE THAT IS IMPORTANT TO ME. IT'S JUST NOT AS EXCITING . . . THE DESIRE IS LOST. YOU GO FROM BEING REAL CAREFUL AROUND EACH OTHER AND BEING ON YOUR BEST BEHAVIOR. ... THEN, OF COURSE, YOU START TO GET COMFORTABLE WITH ONE ANOTHER AND THAT CHANGES—YOUR BAD HABITS COME OUT, YOUR BAD MOODS COME OUT. THAT TAKES SOME OF THE DESIRE AWAY WHEREAS WHEN YOU ARE DATING, IT'S JUST SO SEXUAL AND SO AMAZING AND SO EXCITING . . . DESIRE DWINDLES AS YOU BECOME A COUPLE.”

(Study participant, 34 yrs. old, cited in Sims & Meana, 2010, p.368)

WHAT'S THE TAKE HOME MESSAGE?

Sexual desire is experienced in different ways by each individual. Studies that explore women’s experiences of desire report a range of definitions and personal reflections. Desire can be described in physical, emotional and psychological terms. Women often report that desire is dependent on intimacy, communication and feelings of mutual respect and caring in relationships. Studies also show that desire is negatively impacted by a poor body image, depression, and sexual problems. It should be noted that much of the existing research on female sexual desire has focussed on the experiences of white, heterosexual, partnered women. To add to our understanding of female sexual desire, there is a need for more studies of women from diverse cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and of women of different ages, sexual orientation, and relationship status.



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