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LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual motivations: A critical review[☆]



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Summary This article provides a critical review of the scientific literature on sexual motivations. The results from the literature concerning the plurality of sexual motivations and determinants are first presented. The individual/interindividual and social importance of this object is then emphasized. In the second part are discussed the limitations of the current researches. Some, already addressed elsewhere, concern the design of the works and their reference samples. Others not discussed so far, refer to the statistical models used. The impacts that may result from such data processing on the production of scientific knowledge about sexual motivations are questioned. Research perspectives emerged which will now consider the sexual motivations in a systemic perspective.

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Sexual motivations – the objectives pursued by sexual relations (Mark et al., 2014) – are multiple and varied. They cannot be summed up as simply the search for pleasure, satisfaction or reproduction (big 3, cf. Hatfield et al., 2010). Although some authors (for example Cooper et al., 1998; Hill and Preston, 1996; Impett and Tolman, 2006) only put forward a limited number of such motivations – often fewer than 10 –, others such as Meston and Buss (2007), have numbered as many as 237. Sexual motivations differ according to individuals, cultures and periods (Hatfield et al., 2010; Mark et al., 2014; Tang et al., 2012). These

enable each individual to achieve several personal physical, psychological, social, or economic objectives (Cooper et al., 1998, 2011). These are constructed during a lifetime and take on meaning according to the individual's developmental history (Hatfield et al., 2011; Impett et al., 2008; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2010; Patrick and Lee, 2010; Pélouquin et al., 2013; Schachner and Shaver, 2004).

However, the study of sexual motivation is a recent one (Stephenson et al., 2011). It needs to be further documented, with the aim of rendering it more comprehensive and for the prevention of behaviours presenting a health risk, whether or not such behaviours are sexual (Brousseau et al., 2012; Cooper et al., 1998; Ellickson et al., 2005; Hatfield and Bensman, 2012; Pélouquin et al., 2013). To do so it is necessary to review the limits of existing research.

Limits evoked in the literature

It is now accepted that the study of sexuality, of sexual motivations, and of their behavioural repercussions require

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adopting a complex, systemic, and dynamic perspective (Hatfield et al., 2011). From a methodological standpoint this implies:

- reducing the bias due to sampling, in other words taking into account the cultural specificities of the participants in studies, even within Western countries. However, research on sexual motivations is essentially conducted by north American researchers and concerns almost exclusively samples of female North-American heterosexual students, aged 20 on average (Hatfield et al., 2010);
- minimising bias due to theoretical and ideological expectations on the part of researchers by using rigorous research methodologies based on atheoretical constructions of the typologies of sexual motivations (Meston and Buss, 2007; Stephenson et al., 2011).

Reflective and formative approaches to sexual motivations

Current research privileges factorial analysis methods to identify general categories of sexual motivation. From a statistical standpoint, two types of factorial analysis may be distinguished:

- “pure” factorial analysis (FA), based on a reflective approach to psychic phenomena (Borsboom et al., 2003) implying the existence of a latent variable, a “meta-cause” which pre-exists the variability of the measured observed dimensions (cf. Fig. 1a);
- principal components factorial analysis (PCA), based on a formative approach to psychic phenomena (Borsboom et al., 2003), which considers that the variables measured capture different facets of a phenomenon (cf. Fig. 1b).

In the literature dealing with sexual motivations, these methods are used indifferently. The choice of one or the other of these methods is not questioned and the results are often interpreted in a similar manner. However, the epistemology underlying the types of analyses conducted cannot lead to a similar interpretation of the data (Bollen and Lennox, 1991; Borsboom et al., 2003). In addition, the choice of the type of analyses conducted does not always seem relevant to the theoretical choices made by the authors: Hill and Preston (1996) consider that a limited number of general motivations such as love, reproduction and relieving tension are the drivers of a plurality of adopted behaviours, however, they privilege a formative approach via PCA to the detriment of a reflective approach, which would undoubtedly be more appropriate. In the same way Meston and Buss (2007), in their attempt to provide a hierarchical taxonomy of sexual motivations (Meston and Buss, 2007, p. 478), have summarised the covariation of 140 different motivations in 13 factors based on a formative model (PCA with oblique rotation). However, it is difficult to determine whether the authors envisage that the meta-dimensions explain the variability of motivations or whether, as with Hill and Preston (1996), these methods give meaning to the experience which from that moment on is perceived as a more general phenomenon. This lack of precision is due

to the mixed processing of data: Meston and Buss propose a top-down approach – 4 general categories are broken down into 13 sub-categories – whereas the statistical model used (PCA) is closer to a bottom-up approach (Beavers et al., 2013; Borsboom et al., 2003; Schmittmann et al., 2013). Even if the authors were to privilege a reflective approach (AF), certain questions might be raised. Such as, could one consider that the items measuring motivations guided by pleasure such as “I wanted to experiment physical pleasure”, “I wanted to experiment pure pleasure” and “I wanted to achieve orgasm” are equivalent in their ability to reveal motivations as experienced by the subject? The only interindividual statistical covariation, which is the basis of factorial analysis, is unable to account for the complexity of sexual motivations.

Towards a complex approach to sexual motivations

The choice in the modalities for the rotation of data in order to extract a factorial structure should also be questioned. An orthogonal rotation is based on a partitioned notion of psychological processes. Conversely, an oblique rotation implies a vision of the interdependence of psychological dimensions (Costello and Osborne, 2005). Can one consider that different sexual motivations are independent or inter-dependent? For Meston and Buss (2007), the 13 general categories of sexual motivation are interrelated (p. 483), and they also logically privilege oblique rotations in their statistical analyses. Conversely, Cooper et al. (1998) privilege orthogonal rotations (p. 1536), suggesting, without it being further discussed, that the factors governing sexual motivations are independent from one another.

Although sexual motivations are multiple and varied, they also interact upon one another and follow patterns which give meaning to sexuality. An initial experience motivated by feelings of love and seeking to be close to one another can lead to discovering physical pleasure which in turn will become a sexual driver in itself. The multiplication of experiences through seeking pleasure may in turn lead to a social valorization which, for some, will become a new objective. Hence the study of processes and interactions between motivations appears to be all the more relevant. But such research seems difficult to conduct when one considers the psychological phenomena based on factorial analyses (Kendler et al., 2011; Schmittmann et al., 2013), as in the case of current research. Indeed, reflective models presuppose the absence of relations between observables, whereas formative models implies that the relations between observables which cannot be taken into account by latent variables are noise which must be diminished (Schmittmann et al., 2013, p. 47). Dynamic models of motivations therefore seem necessary (cf. Fig. 1c).

Proposals

Based on recent research proposed in the field of psychopathology (Bringmann et al., 2013; Kendler et al., 2011; Schmittmann et al., 2013), it appears that a complex analysis of sexual motivations requires a systemic interpretation

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