

ORIGINAL RESEARCH—ANATOMY/PHYSIOLOGY

The Partner's Presence in the Sex Research Lab Differentially Affects Sexual Arousal in Women and Men

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DOI: 10.1111/jsm.12406

ABSTRACT

Introduction. The present study addressed the ecological validity of the individual-focused experimental paradigm in sex research.

Aim. The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of partner presence vs. absence in the laboratory testing situation, and of manipulation of attentional focus, on genital and subjective sexual arousal of healthy women and men.

Methods. Sexually functional heterosexual men ($n = 12$) and women ($n = 12$) and their partners participated in this study. During partner presence, the partner sat opposite to the participant; self-focused attention was experimentally manipulated by introducing, respectively, a semi-reflecting glass pane, and a wall-mounted camera.

Main Outcome Measures. Perceived state self-focused attention and genital and subjective sexual arousal during presentation of audiovisual erotic film stimuli were assessed.

Results. Partner presence resulted in higher perceived self-focus ($\eta_p^2 = 0.22$) and lower genital responses to erotic stimulation ($\eta_p^2 = 0.21$). The interaction of partner presence and increased self-focused attention differentially affected genital arousal in female and male participants ($\eta_p^2 = 0.38$). The mean genital response in men was lower during private self-focus than during non-self-focus with the partner present but was higher during private self-focus with the partner absent ($\eta_p^2 = 0.23$). The genital response in women to public self-focus was lower than to private self-focus and to non-self-focus with their partner present ($\eta_p^2 = 0.36$). With the partner absent, the genital response in women to private self-focus was lower than to non-self-focus ($\eta_p^2 = 0.23$). Retrospective subjective arousal of women was higher with partner present ($M = 3.2$) than with partner absent ($M = 2.9$), whereas men reported higher retrospective subjective arousal with their partner absent ($M = 3.5$) than present ($M = 3.1$).

Conclusions. These findings suggest that mere presence of the partner impacts the sexual response differentially in women and men. Enhancing the ecological validity of the individual-based laboratory paradigm for sex research warrants closer examination in future research. **van Lankveld J, Hubben D, Dewitte M, Dingemans ME, den Butter C, and Grauvogl A. The partner's presence in the sex research lab differentially affects sexual arousal in women and men. J Sex Med 2014;11:697–708.**

Key Words. Genital Sexual Arousal; Individual Sex Research Paradigm; Partner Presence; Self-Focused Attention; Laboratory Tests for Sexual Arousal

Introduction

Current experimental sex research has relied on individual-focused paradigms in which study participants are tested while they sit alone in the testing room, and while their own sexual

partner is not physically present [1–3]. One might question the ecological validity of this paradigm, as it may be more representative of solitary, masturbatory conditions than of situations in which partner interaction takes place. In this study, we aimed to address the ecological validity of the

individual-focused paradigm by comparing sexual responses in the laboratory situation, respectively, in the presence vs. absence of the partner. Furthermore, we aimed to shed light on the role of attentional processes in the test situation that may be affected by the presence vs. absence of the partner.

The validity of the laboratory-based paradigm has been the subject of empirical investigation, both in sex research [4] and in other fields of experimental psychological study [5,6]. A meta-study of 21 meta-analyses by Anderson and colleagues [6] revealed satisfactory external validity of laboratory findings in real-life circumstances across various fields of psychological study. However, although the overall findings of Anderson and colleagues were replicated in a more recent meta-study of 82 meta-analyses [5,6], questions were raised about treating the external validity of psychological laboratory research as an undifferentiated whole. In a comparison of laboratory-based and home-based measurement of genital and subjective sexual responses to erotic stimulation, significant effects of context were found [4]. In healthy women, home-measured genital responses were significantly higher than laboratory-measured responses, using the same recording equipment and experimental setup. In contrast, no differences in genital response were observed between the two measurement contexts in women with hypoactive sexual desire disorder (HSDD). This resulted in the finding of significantly higher home-measured genital responses in healthy controls compared with women with HSDD. Furthermore, women's subjective experience of their genital responses was increased in the home situation in both groups.

One of the assets of empirical investigation within the boundaries of the laboratory is that it offers researchers superior possibilities to control various aspects of the situation, including the delivery of experimental conditions, and thus to study the effects of a limited number of factors in relative isolation. Home-based measurement has more limited potential in this respect. This warrants increased efforts to improve the ecological validity of the laboratory setting for research on sexual functioning. In the present study, we aimed to investigate the effects on sexual arousal of the physical presence vs. the absence of the participant's own partner in the laboratory situation.

We also aimed to investigate the psychological mechanism through which the partner's presence might operate upon the sexual response. Several

cognitive factors that are—potentially—related to the presence of the partner have been found to reduce male and female genital responses to erotic stimulation, including attentional distraction [7–9] and increased self-focused attention [10]. Here we focus on self-focused attention that may be increased in the presence of one's partner [11]. This is consistent with the concept of “spectatoring” that Masters and Johnson [12] forwarded more than four decades ago as a potent cause of sexual dysfunctioning. During private self-focused attention, one attends to internal, covert aspects of the self, including thoughts, bodily sensations, and feelings. During public self-focused attention, one attends to publicly observable aspects of the self, including physical appearance, visible emotional responses (e.g., blushing), and behavioral manifestations. Increased state public self-focus elicited by camera surveillance [13,14] and state private self-focus by seeing one's own mirror image [15] have been shown to decrease male and female genital responses during erotic stimulation. On the other hand, focusing one's attention on both erotic stimuli and one's own sexual response has also been found to increase genital sexual arousal in other studies [10]. A curvilinear association of trait and state levels of self-focused attention on the one hand and genital responding on the other hand has been proposed to reconcile these contradictory findings [13,14]. In the present study, we test the prediction that partner presence augments the effect of camera and mirror manipulations on state self-focus (SSF), resulting in higher reduction of genital arousal. The effects of self-focus induction on subjective sexual arousal were found to diverge in previous studies. Whereas subjective sexual arousal was found to be reduced during self-focus induction in some studies [15], it remained unaffected in other studies [13,14,16]. Furthermore, the concordance between genital and subjective measures of sexual functioning under increased self-focus conditions was found to be decreased in some studies [13,17] but remained unaffected in other studies [16]. Based upon the larger number of studies in which decreased sexual concordance was revealed, we hypothesize that sexual concordance will be lower during induction of both public and private self-focused attention and partner presence in the present study.

In the current study, participant gender is hypothesized to moderate the effects of partner presence on genital and subjective sexual arousal, acknowledging the accumulating evidence that

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