

Gender-Specificity of Solitary and Dyadic Sexual Desire among Gynephilic and Androphilic Women and Men

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ABSTRACT

Introduction. Incentive motivation theory proposes that sexual desire emerges from sexual arousal, and is triggered by sexually competent stimuli. Research demonstrates gender and sexual orientation differences in the features that contribute to the competency of sexual stimuli. Men's and gynephilic women's genital arousal tends to be gender-specific with preferred gender eliciting significantly greater genital arousal than nonpreferred gender. In contrast, stimuli depicting preferred and nonpreferred gender elicit similar degrees of genital arousal among androphilic women, termed a gender-nonspecific pattern. Given these differences in the features that elicit a sexual response, and that sexual desire is proposed to emerge from sexual arousal, the question remains as to whether sexual desire would emerge only through exposure to preferred stimuli or whether patterns of responsive desire would parallel those observed for genital arousal.

Aim. The study aims to examine patterns of dyadic and solitary sexual desire in response to stimuli differing in incentive value.

Methods. Thirty androphilic women, 21 gynephilic women, 21 gynephilic men, and 16 androphilic men participated in a sexual psychophysiological session. Participants viewed sexual stimuli that varied the gender of the actors and the intensity of sexual activities depicted.

Main Outcome Measures. Participants reported their degree of desire for sex with a partner (dyadic desire) and desire to masturbate (solitary desire), before and after each film.

Results. Men and gynephilic women exhibited gender-specific patterns of sexual desire. Androphilic women's dyadic desire showed significantly less differentiation between genders, and their solitary desire did not differentiate at all. No gender difference was observed for either type of desire. All groups reported greater desire as stimulus intensity increased.

Conclusions. Gender-nonspecific sexual response is not limited to the sexual arousal patterns of androphilic women, but extends to include responsive sexual desire. Men and gynephilic women, however, show gender-specific responsive sexual desire that parallels their sexual arousal patterns. **Dawson SJ and Chivers ML. Gender specificity of solitary and dyadic sexual desire among gynephilic and androphilic women and men. J Sex Med 2014;11:980-994.**

Key Words. Gender Differences; Sexual Desire; Incentive Motivation; Sexual Arousal; Category-Specificity; Sexual Orientation

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Introduction

Sexual desire is the motivational component of sexual response, with evidence supporting it as being experienced as distinct from other aspects of sexuality, such as physiological sexual arousal (i.e., genital vasocongestion), emotional sexual arousal (i.e., subjective experience of sexual excitement), and sexual feelings (e.g., pleasure) [1–4]. Sexual desire was once considered to spontaneously initiate the sexual response cycle, preceding and contributing to sexual excitement [5]. There is, however, emerging evidence suggesting that sexual arousal and desire are mutually reinforcing rather than discrete responses [6,7] to sexual stimuli. Incentive motivation theory views sexual desire as an emergent property of sexual arousal, activated by external incentives (i.e., sexually competent stimuli) and accompanying internal states (i.e., awareness of bodily and emotional changes) [8,9]. The incentive motivation model (IMM) thus situates desire as being responsive to sexual cues rather than spontaneous.

There is consensus that a sexually competent stimulus is one that yields a sexual response [8,10–13]. Research investigating patterns of sexual arousal provides evidence of differences between women and men in the specific features that contribute to a sexual stimulus' competence (for a review, see Chivers [10]). For example, a person's age and gender are among the most relevant target cues in yielding physiological and subjective sexual arousal for men [14–21].

In contrast, gender cues are less relevant for women's physiological sexual response [15,20,22–24]. Other cues, such as type of sexual activity depicted, relationship context, or the prepotency of a preferred target's sexual features, may be more pertinent to the competency of sexual stimuli among women [15,16,20,22,25,26]. In the current study, we examined the gender-specificity of responsive dyadic and solitary sexual desire in women and men who are attracted to adult women (i.e., gynephilic) and those attracted to adult men (i.e., androphilic), to better understand the relationship between sexual arousal, sexual desire, and stimulus competency. Characterizing people's sexual attractions in this way (e.g., androphilic/gynephilic), rather than relying on self-reported sexual identity to characterize sexual attractions, facilitates more precise analyses of the features (e.g., preferred and nonpreferred gender cues) that elicit sexual arousal, particularly because sexual identity may or may not correspond with some-

one's direction of sexual attractions. For example, a woman who self-identifies as lesbian may report substantial sexual attractions to both women and men.

Gender and Sexual Orientation Differences in the Features that Elicit Genital and Subjective Sexual Arousal

There are well-established gender and sexual orientation differences in the specificity of sexual arousal patterns [15,16,19,20,22,24,27–32]. These studies demonstrate that gynephilic and androphilic men exhibit a gender-specific pattern of arousal. That is, both groups of men exhibit significantly greater genital and subjective sexual arousal when presented with stimuli depicting their preferred gender and/or activity (e.g., female–female intercourse and male–male intercourse, respectively). Interestingly, the arousal patterns of gynephilic and androphilic women are strikingly similar to one another in response to certain stimuli, and appear to correspond less with their sexual orientations. Women exhibit relatively similar degrees of genital response to stimuli depicting both preferred and nonpreferred gender dyads (e.g., male–male, female–female, and male–female intercourse) [15,16,20,22–24,30,32,33]. This pattern of responding is gender-nonspecific because similar responses are elicited by male and female stimuli.

One limitation to using depictions of dyad sex as stimuli when examining gender-specificity of sexual responses is that it confounds target gender and activity. Also, given the potentially unfamiliar nature of some same-gender sexual interactions for opposite-gender attracted individuals (androphilic women and gynephilic men), it is plausible that the incentive value of such stimuli may not have been associated with high reward or were not equivalent in their appetitive value [16]. If the incentive value of the stimuli was in fact different, then this could influence response patterns. A better test of gender-specificity would involve using stimuli depicting single targets rather than dyads.

A few studies have been conducted to examine gender-specificity of sexual arousal using single-target stimuli [16]. Similar to the studies reported previously using dyadic stimuli, androphilic women display a gender-nonspecific pattern of genital response to stimuli depicting an individual male and an individual female [16]. In contrast to the findings observed when using dyadic sex as stimuli, single-target stimuli are, however, capable

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