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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The practice of masturbation for women: The end of a taboo? ☆

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KEYWORDS

Female sexuality;
Sexual behavior;
Masturbation;
Sexual morality;
Couple

Summary

Objectives. – For a long time taboo, the practice of feminine masturbation tends to be trivialised under the effect of a change in cultural representations and public discourse on the subject – for example, in films, music or TV series – but also the effect of much wider access for women to arousal media (e.g. on-line pornography, erotic books) or self-stimulation objects more suitable for the expectations of a feminine audience (sex toys). Symptomatic of changing cultural norms, which hang over female sexuality, this ability of women to take on the purely individual and autoerotic share of their sexuality highlights their greater ease to admit to practices, which are not within the socially-acceptable framework of the couple. Despite the fact that the behaviour of both sexes have come much closer in the matter, masturbation is still far from becoming a component of women's sexual repertoire which is as normal as it is for men, nor is it a practice that is easily admitted to a partner.

Method. – The survey was carried out by self-administered questionnaire on-line with a sample of 913 women from 18 to 69 years of age, extracted from a sample of 2011 people representative of the French population aged 18 and older, in June 2017. Quotas were used to ensure that the samples used were, overall, properly representative (sex, age, occupation, region, urban unit size, marital status).

Results. – The comparison of these data with those measured in 2012 using identical procedures shows that the masturbation behaviour of women is much closer to that of men than it was before. Similarly, the comparison of the autoerotic activities of women in a couple with those of single women reveals that masturbation continues in a couple for a number of women, as a substitute for or in parallel with conjugal sexual relations. But this form of solitary pleasure is far from being accepted within couples, in particular by women who are dissatisfied with the quality and quantity of their conjugal relations.

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Conclusion. — For many women living in a couple (45%), masturbation remains a taboo subject, no doubt because they fear that this practice would be interpreted as a sign of the inability of their partner to meet their needs. The taboo around female masturbation therefore still has great resonance, not only among women who struggle to disassociate sexuality and conjugality but also among those whose partner shows signs of failing sexuality.

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Introduction

When reminding her partner that “men are perhaps necessary for procreation but not for pleasure” of women, the actress playing *Wonder Woman* in the first blockbuster film dedicated to the character (Patty Jenkins, *Wonder Woman*, 2017) has the gift of putting a smile on the face of the female audience. But in this type of film aimed at the largest numbers, her words are also indicative of a new way of representing female sexuality in mass culture, a new way that transverses not only the moral precepts which traditionally hang over the practice of masturbation but also sexual scripts presenting coitus: the man and his member as being the only legitimate sources of female pleasure. However, this change in representations of a practice, which has nevertheless long been regarded as taboo in the female sex, is not limited to the world of cinema. In the light of the results of a recent study by Ifop (June 2017), it goes hand-in-hand with masturbation in the female population becoming widely accepted. Challenging certain received ideas on masturbation, in particular the clichés which say it is only reserved for the male sex and single women, this study therefore merits attention because what can be learned from it signifies a change in the relationship French women have with their sexuality.

Materials and methods

This article presents the principal results of a survey conducted by Ifop from 15 to 16 June 2017 using a mechanism adapted to the subject of the study, which allows its development to be observed over the years. To this end, Ifop opted for the following methodological choices:

A method of administration which reduces the effects of social desirability

Because of the intimate nature of the topic addressed, Ifop made the choice to use a self-administered method insofar as the absence of an interviewer reduces the tendency, which individuals may have of wanting to appear at their best and particularly to underreport on certain behaviour perceived as transgressive or inappropriate by prevailing morality. By guaranteeing anonymity to the interviewees, this method enables those who do not want to address sensitive subjects in front of an interviewer or in the presence of a relation (if the interview took place before a third party) to speak freely.

Questions and a field of investigation which allow trends to be observed

In order to guarantee perfect comparability of results with those published in the past, Ifop has taken care to repeat the same formulation of questions and the same survey scope during the last two large surveys on sexuality conducted in France (ACSF 1993, CSF 2006). Only the collection method differs. With the exception of the Simon report (1970), the data of which was collected face-to-face, the ACSF and CSS surveys were collected by telephone and the Ifop survey by on-line self-administered questionnaire. The same question formulation and same survey scope were used. The sample size and sampling methods by quota for Ifop and the Simon Report and based on a random sample for the ACSF and CSS surveys have differences.

A collection method which enables the main part of the reference population to be covered

The choice of the Internet is relevant insofar as there is no longer any major coverage failure in this category of the population: nearly nine out of ten French people aged between 18 and 69 (INSEE 2015) use the Internet regularly. In this context, the survey was carried out by self-administered questionnaire on-line with a sample of 913 women from 18 to 69 years of age, extracted from a sample of 2011 people representative of the French population aged 18 and older. Quotas were used to ensure that the samples used were, overall, properly representative (sex, age, occupation, region, urban unit size, marital status).

Objectives

This work seeks to describe and explain the progression of the practice of masturbation among French women during the last decades, in particular since the last major survey on sexuality carried out in France (CSF 2006). In order to do this, this article compares the data collected by Ifop in France in June 2017 not only with the latest institutional surveys (Simon 1970, ACSF 1992, CSF 2006) but also with other data constituted in recent years according to strictly identical administration procedures (e.g. Ifop-HV 2012). Twenty-five years after the article by André Béjin (Béjin, 1993) which highlighted the underreporting of this practice in the female population, the objective is to have an update on the question of the acceptability of this practice among French women at a time when the cultural norms hang-

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