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LITERATURE REVIEW

Using the dual control model to understand problematic sexual behaviors in men[☆]

K. Nolet^{*}, A. Larouche Wilson, J.-L. Rouleau

Département de psychologie, université de Montréal, 90, avenue Vincent-d'Indy, H2V 2S9 Montréal, Québec, Canada

KEYWORDS

Dual Control model;
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Sexual coercion

Summary A strong sexual response in men is associated to a variety of sexual behaviors that can result in severe consequences, like hypersexuality, sexual risk-taking, and sexual coercion. However, considering a sexual response as an “out of control” impulse fails to take into account regulation and inhibition factors involved in these types of behaviors. The Dual Control model proposes that the strength of the sexual response depends on the balance between excitation and inhibitory systems. The goal of the present review is to demonstrate the usefulness of this model in understanding problematic sexual behaviors in both heterosexual and homosexual men. Empirical studies identify three main processes associated to the three control systems of this model: a sexual response that is too strong, a lack of inhibition of this response, and inhibition provoked by the preoccupation of sexual performance. Clinicians as well as researchers should thus consider excitation and inhibition factors when treating and conducting research on problematic sexual behaviors.

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Introduction

Sexual behaviors considered “out of control” can have important relational, functional, medical, and legal consequences for an individual. However, labelling them as

such assumes such behaviors are the result of an uncontrollable sexual impulse and unrestrained sensation seeking. The terms *hypersexuality*, *impulsivity*, *compulsivity*, and *sexual addiction* are good examples of this type of conceptualization, where too much emphasis is put on the strength of the sexual response and not enough on the control processes behind it. In addition, these terms reduce these behaviors to individual pathologies, limiting our consideration of normal functioning processes that could be involved. As such, to understand sexual responses and motivations to engage in sexual behaviors, both approach and avoidance factors have to be considered.

In the Dual Control model, Bancroft and Janssen (2000) postulate that the sexual response is the result of a balance between excitation and inhibitory processes. These processes would depend on theoretical neurophysiological

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^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: kevin.nolet@umontreal.ca (K. Nolet), alexa.larouche.wilson@umontreal.ca (A. Larouche Wilson), joanne-lucine.rouleau@umontreal.ca (J.-L. Rouleau).

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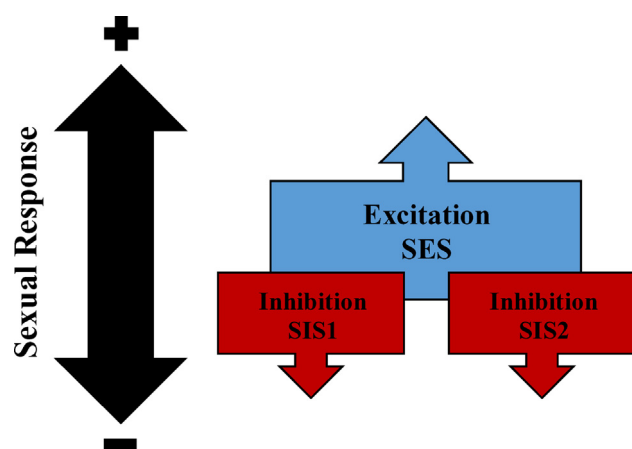


Figure 1 The Dual Control model of sexual arousal.

systems whose functions are to detect opportunities and threats to the sexual response: one sexual excitation system (SES) and two sexual inhibition systems (Fig. 1). The first inhibitory system, fear of performance failure (SIS1), would focus specifically on intrapersonal threats (e.g., performance anxiety), whereas the second, fear of performance consequences (SIS2), would focus on external threats (e.g. a partner's reaction). Hence, in a given situation, the activation of a sexual response would only occur when the level of excitation surpasses the level of inhibition. The sensitivity of these systems would vary from one individual to another, leading to variability in sexual reactivity. The propensity for excitation and inhibition can be measured with questionnaires: the SIS/SES scale (Janssen et al., 2002a) or the adapted version for women, the SESII-W/M (Milhausen et al., 2008). This review aims to better understand hypersexuality, sexual risk-taking, and sexual coercion in men by demonstrating the usefulness of a model including excitation and inhibition factors involved in sexual responses.

Psychophysiological response

The Dual Control model postulates that the strength of a sexual response will depend on individual propensities for excitability and inhibition, and on the type of stimuli presented. In one of the first validation studies, Janssen et al. (2002b) used penile plethysmography (PPG) to measure genital response in heterosexual males viewing erotic films with or without depictions of sexual coercion. Individuals having a high score on the SES had a stronger genital response to all stimuli, whereas those having a weak score on the SIS2 were not inhibited by the coercive stimuli. Although only the effect of a high SES was replicated in a subsequent study (Janssen et al., 2009), the high sexual risk participants, in this study, had stronger responses to all stimuli presented when compared to low risk participants, suggesting that a greater propensity for sexual arousal is associated to greater sexual risk-taking. This greater propensity could also affect an individual's capacity to voluntarily control their sexual response. Winters et al. (2009) reported that participants having a high score on the SES were less efficient in controlling their subjective sexual arousal, whereas those having a high score on the SIS2 were better able to control their

physiological one. Recently, our research team was unable to replicate these findings (Nolet et al., 2016). However, following a self-regulation task, participants with a high score on the SIS2 had more difficulty controlling their genital responses, suggesting that a strong inhibition system can be associated to a failure in voluntary control of the sexual response in situations where control is frequently needed.

Hypersexuality

The Dual Control model highlights different mechanisms and etiologies underlining sexual regulation difficulties like hypersexuality, whether defined as an addiction, compulsion or sexual impulsivity. According to Winters et al. (2010), hypersexuality is nothing more than distress associated with having high sexual thoughts and needs. Compared to other men in the community, men reporting sexual compulsions (Winters et al., 2010) or hypersexual behaviors (Rettenberger et al., 2015) had a stronger propensity for excitation and a lower propensity for inhibition (SIS2). However, in both cases, the SIS2 no longer predicted these behaviors once the excitation variables were considered, supporting the idea that hypersexuality is a strong manifestation of the SES.

Nevertheless, different etiologies, and thus different implications for the SIS/SES systems, could exist depending on the type of hypersexual behavior or sexual orientation. For example, a weak SIS2 could be more specifically associated to behaviors involving other individuals rather than to those who compulsively masturbate (Bancroft and Vukadinovic, 2004). In men having sexual intercourse with other men, the SIS/SES scales were not able to predict hypersexuality (Miner et al., 2016). However, a lack of sexual control could be predicted by a high score on the SES and SIS1, and a weak score on the SIS2. The severity of symptoms could also play a role in this population (Parsons et al., 2016). Men presenting with hypersexual and compulsive behaviors had higher scores on both the SES and SIS1. These men also reported a higher number of anal sexual relationships without the use of condoms (Parsons et al., 2016), suggesting that sexual compulsivity and hypersexuality play a role in sexual risk-taking. Finally, Walton et al. (2017) confirmed that multiple mechanisms explain hypersexuality: high scores on SES and on SIS1, as well as weak scores on SIS2 were able to predict hypersexual behaviors. High impulsivity trait, and self-reported symptoms of depression and anxiety could also predict these behaviors, possibly indicating the use of sexual behaviors as a dysfunctional mechanism of emotion regulation.

Many men report an increase in their level of sexual arousal when they feel anxious or depressed (Bancroft et al., 2004; Bancroft et al., 2003). Hodgson et al. (2016) observed that participants viewing erotic stimuli who had a high SES had stronger genital responses when reporting negative emotions, whereas those having a high SIS1 had a weaker genital response. Emotion regulation difficulties could also be found in cybersex addiction. Laier and Brand (2014) reported that the more men had strong tendencies for sexual excitability (and a strong subjective responses when viewing erotic materials), the more they were likely to use sexuality as a mechanism for emotion regulation and to lack control

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