

ORGASM

The Significance of the Female Orgasm: A Nationally Representative, Dyadic Study of Newlyweds' Orgasm Experience

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ABSTRACT

Background: Self-reported orgasm, perception of partner's orgasm, and misperception of partner's orgasm have each been correlated with individual sexual and relationship satisfaction, but these associations have rarely included dyadic data, have not fully accounted for potentially confounding variables such as sexual communication, and have never been simultaneously studied with a nationally representative sample.

Aim: To provide a more complete picture of how the orgasmic experience within the heterosexual couple influences individual and partner sexual and relationship satisfaction.

Methods: Using a nationally representative dyadic sample of 1,683 newlywed heterosexual couples, a structural equation model was estimated to test associations between husband and wife self-reported orgasm frequency, husband and wife report of the other partner's orgasm frequency, and husband and wife misperception of their partner's orgasm frequency, as correlates of relationship and sexual satisfaction.

Outcomes: Both husband and wife completed the Couples Satisfaction Index to assess their own relationship satisfaction, and completed a sexual satisfaction instrument designed for the CREATE study.

Results: 87% of husbands and 49% of wives reported consistently experiencing orgasm. 43% of husbands misperceived how often their wives experienced orgasm. The final structural equation model, including sexual communication, explained moderate amounts of variance in wives' and husbands' relationship satisfaction, and a high level of variance for wives' and husbands' sexual satisfaction. Wives' relationship satisfaction was positively associated with wives' and husbands' sexual communication. Wives' sexual satisfaction was positively associated with self-reported orgasm frequency, and both wives' and husbands' sexual communication. Husbands' relationship satisfaction was positively associated with husbands' and wives' sexual communication. Husbands' sexual satisfaction was positively associated with husbands' perception of wives' orgasm frequency, and both husbands' and wives' sexual communication.

Clinical Translation: When counseling couples, clinicians should give particular attention to the wife's orgasm experiences, to potentially help both husbands and wives have higher sexual satisfaction.

Strengths & Limitations: Strengths of this study include the use of a nationally representative sample and dyadic data. Limitations include cross-sectional data, and the assessment of sexual experiences only in newlywed couples.

Conclusion: Wives' orgasm (wives' self-report of frequency and husbands' perception of frequency) has a unique positive association with sexual satisfaction, even after taking into account other aspects of the orgasm experience and sexual communication. **Leonhardt ND, Willoughby BJ, Busby DM, et al. The Significance of the Female Orgasm: A Nationally Representative, Dyadic Study of Newlyweds' Orgasm Experience. J Sex Med 2018;XX:XXX–XXX.**

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Key Words: Sexuality; Sexual Satisfaction; Orgasm; Marriage; Marital Relationship; Misperception

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INTRODUCTION

Orgasm is viewed as one of many goals for sexual activity,¹ and a source of pleasure and fulfillment in a sexual relationship.^{1–3} Unsurprisingly, orgasm has been identified as a key indicator for sexual satisfaction and the quality of the relationship as a

whole.^{4,5} Due to orgasm's importance for sexual and relational satisfaction,^{4,5} studies have explored the correlates of self-reported orgasm (how often someone reports being orgasmic^{4,6}), perception of a partner's orgasm (how often someone believes his or her partner is orgasmic⁷), and even misperception of a partner's orgasm (the discrepancy between how often someone believes his or her partner is orgasmic and how often that partner actually reports being orgasmic^{8,9}). However, no research to our knowledge has evaluated how each of these factors simultaneously predicts sexual and relationship satisfaction while utilizing both partners' perspectives in a nationally representative sample.

Self-reported orgasm plays a role in positive relational experiences, as it is often reported as a goal of sexual desire,¹⁰ and as a reason for having intercourse.³ Scholars have consistently suggested that both men and women benefit from achieving orgasm in their sexual relationship, with some suggesting that it may play a more important role for men because they rate it as a higher priority in their sexual experience.¹⁰

Helping a partner achieve orgasm has also been suggested as an important factor for promoting positive outcomes, as both men and women in qualitative studies have expressed that helping their partner reach orgasm is a fulfilling aspect of the relationship.¹ Perceiving a partner to be orgasmic may be a particularly salient factor for men, as recent research suggests that men rank higher than women in desiring to please their partner during sex,¹⁰ and that helping a woman partner achieve orgasm acts as a masculinity achievement for men.⁷

In addition to baseline perception of a partner's orgasm, the misperception of a partner's orgasm may yield a unique influence on sexual and relationship satisfaction, as research on sexual desire¹¹ has highlighted that discrepancies between partners can have a unique influence on the quality of a relationship. With specific regard to orgasm, it is not uncommon for men to over-perceive how often their partner is orgasmic.^{8,9} Reasons for misperception range from a general lack of knowledge surrounding orgasm and sexuality,¹² to women faking orgasm to affirm men's masculine skills,¹³ or simply wanting sex to end.¹⁴

Aims

The purpose of this study was to provide a more complete picture for how the orgasmic experience is connected to sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction among heterosexual couples. This study attempted to accomplish this by simultaneously evaluating self-reported orgasm, perception of a partner's orgasm, and misperception of a partner's orgasm, for both partners in a nationally representative sample of heterosexual newlyweds. In general, this study investigated whether higher self-reported orgasm, higher perception of a partner's orgasm, and lower misperception of a partner's orgasm would be associated with higher sexual and relational satisfaction, even when inserting demographic controls such as age difference, education, religiosity, and race.

An important consideration when evaluating various aspects of orgasm is whether the orgasmic experience uniquely influences sexual and relational satisfaction, or is simply a proxy for positive sexual dynamics within the dyad. To ensure that orgasm is not simply a proxy variable for underlying sexual dynamics, sexual communication was accounted for in a second model. Sexual communication has been shown to play a highly salient role in orgasm,^{15,16} and both sexual and relationship satisfaction.^{17,18} Having a first model precluding sexual communication, and a second model with sexual communication as a control, allowed this study to develop a preliminary understanding of the extent that orgasm uniquely relates with sexual and relational satisfaction, or is just a proxy variable for broader sexual dynamics.

METHODS

Participants and Procedure

Participants for this study were respondents in the CREATE study,¹⁹ which is a nationally representative survey of newly married couples that was approved by the institutional review board. Before starting the survey, an online consent was endorsed by the participants. Data collection efforts took place from October 2016–September 2017. Participants for the study were recruited using a 2-stage cluster stratification sample design, with the first stage involving a stratified selection of 239 counties, and the second involving a sample of 11,889 recent marriages within those selected counties. Among those contacted, individuals (14%) or dyads (86%) from 2,187 marriages were recruited into the study. Of the initial sample of 11,889, there were 1,220 marriages that did not meet inclusion criteria, meaning the response rate should be calculated with a denominator of 10,669 couples. The adjusted response rate was approximately 20% (2,187/10,669), which is a successful response rate for studies of dyads.^{19,20} Couples needed to be selected through the study procedures (counties selected through a stratified random process; then marriage certificates obtained from those counties), had to be currently married, and living in the United States. 1 Spouse was required to be between the age of 18 and 36 years, and the marriage had to be the first marriage for at least 1 of the spouses. Of the 2,187 participants, 2,106 were in heterosexual marriages, and 423 of the couples did not respond to questions about sexuality. As both partners' data were needed for calculating a discrepancy score, those who did not respond to questions about sexuality were omitted from the analyses. The final analytic sample for the current study was 1,683 heterosexual couples. Preliminary analyses indicated that couples who did not complete measures for sexuality did not differ from those that did in age, race, education, or religiosity ($P > .05$). The sample was recruited using a modified Dillman approach²⁰ that involved physical mailings via U.S. postal services. A sampling weight was designed and used in the study that enabled inferences to the population of married couples in the United States (further details about the sampling and weighting of data can be found from the CREATE codebook¹⁹).

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