

Written Descriptions of Orgasm: A Study of Sex Differences

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It has generally been assumed that a male's experience of orgasm is different from a female's experience of orgasm. In this study, a questionnaire consisting of 48 descriptions of orgasm (24 male and 24 female) was submitted to 70 judges. These professionals (obstetrician-gynecologists, psychologists, and medical students) were to sex-identify the descriptions to discover whether sex differences could be detected. The judges could not correctly identify the sex of the person describing an orgasm. Furthermore, none of the three professional groups represented in the sample of judges did better than any of the other groups. Male judges did no better than female judges and vice versa. These findings suggest that the experience of orgasm for males and females is essentially the same.

KEY WORDS: orgasm; male; female.

INTRODUCTION

Kinsey *et al.* (1953) noted the remarkable similarity of male and female sexual response, but there was little interest in the topic of orgasm prior to the publication of Masters and Johnson's (1966) research on the physiology of sexual response. Since 1966 there has been considerable discussion in the literature about female orgasm. Especially through the vocal efforts of the women's liberation movement, orgasm during coitus has come to be considered a woman's due just as it is her partner's.

An important difference in male and female orgasm is the relationship to reproductive function. Orgasm for the male because of its association with ejaculation is closely linked to effective conception. The male who does not have an orgasm and does not ejaculate has little possibility of impregnating a female. The

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nonorgasmic female, however, may be quite fertile. There appears to be no relationship between orgasmic capacity in the female and her fecundity.

The work of Masters and Johnson on the psychological and physiological aspects of orgasm in 1966 raised serious issues for persons working in the area of sexual behavior. The heretofore widely accepted psychoanalytic belief in two kinds of female orgasm, the clitoral and the more "mature" vaginal orgasm, was disputed. Masters and Johnson found that all orgasms were the same physiologically regardless of where stimulation had occurred.

Singer and Singer (1972) dispute this finding and argue for a broader definition of orgasm which incorporates emotional satisfaction as well as physiological changes. Also in favor of a broader definition, Glenn and Kaplan (1968) suggest defining female orgasm not only by the location of stimulation but also by the location of orgasmic experience. They feel a need for further research on the anatomical and physiological changes that take place during orgasm and would like to see researchers look for the differences among orgasms as defined by their method. Heiman (1968) proposes another tack; although he applauds the work of Masters and Johnson on the anatomy of orgasm, he discusses a need for going beyond their work and examining the psychological factors in orgasm. Female sexuality and the role of orgasm must be reexamined within the context of the total life experience of women living in a particular culture and society. Robertiello (1970) also argues for psychologically differentiated orgasms. While orgasms are physiologically the same, he argues there are two distinct and easily distinguishable kinds of orgasm experienced subjectively. He also argues against equating having orgasms with the degree of pleasure and satisfaction a woman finds in sex.

Wallin and Clark's 1963 study was designed with this issue in mind. They questioned the assumption that orgasm is necessary for a woman's enjoyment of intercourse. They found a marked positive correlation between frequency of orgasm and enjoyment of coitus but orgasm was not necessary for this enjoyment: 17% of the women in their sample enjoyed coitus very much but experienced orgasm infrequently or not at all. Little difference in marital happiness or sexual adjustment between orgasmic and nonorgasmic nonvirgins was also found by Shope and Broderick (1967). In yet another correlational study, Gebhard (1966) found that greater marital happiness was associated with higher percentages of coitus resulting in orgasm for the woman but this was so only in the extreme categories of very happy marriage and very unhappy marriage. Gebhard also found that the percentage of orgasm during coitus rose steadily with the length of the marriage but that differences were not great. He found a positive correlation between length of sex play prior to coitus and the rate of orgasm for the woman and a tendency for higher rates of orgasm to be associated with prolonged intromission.

The work of Masters and Johnson created much discussion among psychoanalytic practitioners. Freud differentiated between a clitoral and a vaginal orgasm, conceptualizing the latter as more mature. Gillespie (1969) concludes from Masters and Johnson's research that it is impossible to distinguish clitoral from vaginal orgasm as demanded by psychoanalytic theory. Moore (1968), on the other hand, attempts to reconcile the apparent discrepancies between the observations of Masters and Johnson and psychoanalytic theory. A preference for vaginally induced orgasms is the result of maturation of the ego and contributes to a woman's feminine identity. Focusing on a different aspect of sexual activity, including orgasm, Barnett (1968) reexamines the Oedipal conflict within a psychoanalytic framework. Yet another focus of the literature on orgasm is the influence of various hormonal levels on a woman's desire for sex and capacity for orgasm (Kane *et al.*, 1969).

It is apparent that most of the recent literature on orgasm has been either a discussion of the work of Masters and Johnson and its implications or of a correlational nature. Except for the work of Masters and Johnson, there has been no experimental research in the area. In addition, the attention of these studies has been almost exclusively on female orgasm.

The present study was designed to expand upon the experimental work in the area of orgasm, both male and female. It has been assumed for a long time that there are basic differences between a male's experience of orgasm and a female's experience of orgasm. What these differences are has not been made particularly clear, but, in the opinion of the authors, it has generally been agreed that a male orgasm is more sudden and explosive in nature while a female orgasm is more prolonged and less violent.

In order to discover whether such differences are reported, professional judges were employed to identify the sex of 48 written descriptions of orgasm. Three professional groups were represented: obstetricians-gynecologists, clinical psychologists, and medical students. Eight females and 62 males were represented. The question of the ability of these professional and sex groups to sex-identify these written descriptions was also examined.

PROCEDURE

Students in a college introductory course on the psychology of sexual behavior were asked to write a description of orgasm. Their instructor gave them the following instructions:

"Write a brief statement indicating what an orgasm feels like. If you have never had an orgasm, please describe how you think it would feel. Do not sign your name, but indicate your sex and whether your description of an orgasm is

real or imagined by putting an R or an I on the paper. Limit your comments to at most one side of the paper.

“On the other side of the paper, describe what it feels like when you have eaten too much. If you have never eaten too much, describe how you think it would feel. Put R for real and I for imagined.” An explanation for this second description will be given later.

From the approximately 300 students present in the class, 246 responses were obtained, 121 male and 125 female. Of these, the 26 imaginary descriptions of orgasm were eliminated from the sample; three were male and 23 were female. Another 42 responses were eliminated either because they consisted of ten words or less or because they were unalterably male or female. Descriptions that were unalterably male or female were those that were clearly sex-identifiable (feelings in the penis were described, for example) and could not be altered with the substitution of a few sex-neutral words. It was also decided to eliminate orgasm descriptions of ten words or less because such descriptions would be so concise as to allow very little basis for sex identification. After these deletions, 178 responses remained, 85 of them male and 93 of them female.

The descriptions of overeating were obtained as part of a control for sex differences in the use of descriptive language. It may be that certain males and females can be sex-typed simply on the basis of the flavor they impart to their language, in this case, written language. To rule out sexually stereotyped stylistic differences, five naive individuals (three females and two males) were asked to classify the 178 descriptions of overeating as either M or F. On a purely chance basis, the descriptions should have been correctly sex-identified by two and one-half individuals. If a description was correctly classified by four or five of the individuals, therefore, there was reason to believe that the language of the description was sex-typed in some way. The descriptions of orgasm paired with these sex-typed descriptions of overeating were eliminated from the sample. Fifty-four such descriptions were eliminated this way.

Of the 124 descriptions of orgasm that remained, 48 (24 M and 24 F) were randomly selected for use in this study. The 48 descriptions were assigned, using the table of random numbers, to one of three groups. Group A contained 11 female descriptions and five male descriptions. Group B contained eight F and eight M descriptions. Group C contained five F and 11 M descriptions. The setting up of groups in this manner was done to make the task of sex-identification more difficult for the judges and, it was hoped, to reduce the possibility of lucky guessing. The judges were not told the number of M and F descriptions in each group.

The 48 descriptions of orgasm were examined and slightly altered where it was necessary to eliminate wording that was positively sex-identifying. “Partner” was substituted for “wife,” “husband,” or “boyfriend,” etc.; “genitals” was substituted for “penis,” “vagina,” etc. (See the Appendix for the complete questionnaire of 48 items.)

Table I. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations on the Sex of Orgasm Questionnaire for Occupational and Sex Groups

Group	Mean score	Standard deviation
Medical students ($N = 26$)	25.96	3.00
Obstetrician-gynecologists ($N = 31$)	25.03	3.12
Psychologists ($N = 13$)	24.92	2.60
Males ($N = 62$)	25.41	3.09
Females ($N = 8$)	24.87	2.03
Total ($N = 70$)	25.36	2.98

Questionnaires were submitted to groups of medical students, obstetrician-gynecologists, and clinical psychologists (graduate students and faculty). The judges were asked simply to go over each description and to classify it M or F depending on whether they thought it was written by a man or a woman. Questionnaires were then scored; the score was the number of correct classifications (Table I).

t tests were performed on the data in order to discover whether any of the three professional groups could sex-identify the descriptions of orgasm better than any of the other groups (Table II). The judges were further separated into sex groups in order to discover whether members of either sex could better sex-identify the descriptions than members of the other sex.

Tests of χ^2 were also performed to ascertain whether the individuals with the most correct classifications and the least correct classifications from each group had performed significantly better or worse than chance (Table III). If this was true, it would then be determined if other individuals had also performed significantly better or worse than chance.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A frequency distribution of correct classifications obtained on the sex of orgasm questionnaire is shown in Fig. 1. The highest possible score on the

Table II. t Scores for the Comparison of Means Between Occupational and Sex Groups

Comparison groups	t score
Medical students/obstetricians-gynecologists ($df = 55$)	0.025 n.s.
Medical students/psychologists ($df = 37$)	0.024 n.s.
Obstetrician-gynecologists/psychologists ($df = 42$)	0.003 n.s.
Males/females ($df = 68$)	0.007 n.s.

Table III. Tests of χ^2 for the Best and Worst Individuals in Each Professional Group

Group	χ^2
Medical students	
Best individual	6.02 ^a
Worst individual	1.02
Obstetrician-gynecologists	
Best individual	3.52
Worst individual	2.52
Psychologists	
Best individual	2.52
Worst individual	0.18

^aStatistically significant at the 0.05 level.

questionnaire is 48; a score of 24 would be expected by chance alone. Although the distribution is very slightly skewed to the right, analysis of the *t* tests reported in Table II indicates that the judges in our sample could not correctly identify the sex of the person having an orgasm on the basis of written descriptions of orgasm alone. Table III shows the χ^2 values for the highest- and lowest-scoring individuals in each professional group. In only one case, the best-performing medical student, are the results statistically significant. This student, with a score of 33 out of a possible 48, performed significantly better than chance at the 0.05 level. It would be expected with 70 judges at the 5% level of significance that as many as three individuals could by chance alone make correct sortings. In fact, only one did. Among the other two groups, the highest- and lowest-scoring individuals did not perform significantly better or worse than chance on the sex-identification of written reports of orgasm.

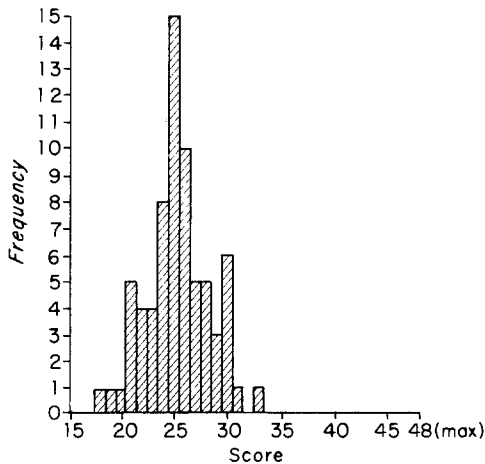


Fig. 1. Frequency of each score on the sex of orgasm questionnaire ($N = 70$).

An analysis of the items on the questionnaire revealed that item 8 in group A was perceived correctly as having been written by a female more often than would be expected by chance alone (65 of the 70 individuals, $p < 0.01$). This description was the only one that dealt with multiple orgasms ("And then if the lovemaking is continued it repeats again and again"), a phenomenon which appears predominantly female.

CONCLUSIONS

From the results of this study, it would appear that individuals are unable to distinguish the sex of a person from that person's written description of his or her orgasm. Neither psychologists, medical students, nor obstetrician-gynecologists had significant success in this task. Furthermore, neither sex was more adept at recognizing characteristics in descriptions of orgasm that would serve as a basis for sex differentiation, if, indeed, there are factors in such descriptions which can be differentiated.

These results raise question about the assumption that orgasm as experienced by males is something different from orgasm as experienced by females. The two have long been considered to be qualitatively different. The only difference consistently noticed by the sample of professionals in this study was the report of multiple orgasms in a single female subject. This suggests that the experience of orgasm for males and females is subjectively the same, except that women appear able to have multiple orgasms.

It may be that only in written descriptions of orgasm are there no differences. Perhaps our written language is insufficient to handle the differences which may exist. It is possible also that differences do exist but these professionals were unable to recognize them.

It seems more parsimonious, however, without contrary data, to view the results of this study as indicating no absolute differences in male and female orgasm other than the occurrence of multiple orgasms with women. Until there is empirical evidence to the contrary, it is reasonable to assume that the experience of orgasm for males and females is essentially the same.

Further research should attempt to discover (1) what professionals believe to be the differences between male and female orgasm, and (2) whether these differences are borne out by experimental findings.

APPENDIX A. SEX OF ORGASM QUESTIONNAIRE

The following three groups of statements are replies by both men and women to a request to describe what an orgasm feels like. For each group please indicate in the blank spaces provided whether you think the statement was written by a male or a female. Put an M for male and an F for female.

Group A

1. ____ A sudden feeling of lightheadedness followed by an intense feeling of relief and elation. A rush. Intense muscular spasms of the whole body. Sense of euphoria followed by deep peace and relaxation.
2. ____ Feels like tension building up until you think it can't build up any more, then release. The orgasm is both the highest point of tension and the release almost at the same time. Also feeling contractions in the genitals. Tingling all over.
3. ____ I often see spots in front of my eyes during orgasm. The feeling itself is so difficult to describe other than the most pleasurable of all sensory impressions. I suppose the words "fluttering sensation" describe the physical feeling I get. All nerve endings sort of burst and quiver.
4. ____ There is a great release of tensions that have built up in the prior stages of sexual activity. This release is extremely pleasurable and exciting. The feeling seems to be centered in the genital region. It is extremely intense and exhilarating. There is a loss of muscular control as the pleasure mounts and you almost can not go on. You almost don't want to go on. This is followed by the climax and refractory states!
5. ____ An orgasm feels extremely pleasurable, yet it can be so violent that the feeling of uncontrol is frightening. It also is hard to describe because it is as if I am in limbo — only conscious of release.
6. ____ To me an orgasmic experience is the most satisfying *pleasure* that I have experienced in relation to any other type of satisfaction or pleasure that I've had which were nonsexually oriented.
7. ____ The period when the orgasm takes place — a loss of a real feeling for the surroundings except for the other person. The movements are spontaneous and intense.
8. ____ They vary a great deal depending on circumstances. If it's just a physical need or release it's OK, but it takes more effort to "get there." If you're really very much in love (at least in my case) it's so close at hand that the least physical expression by your partner, or slightest touch on the genitals brings it on. An then if the lovemaking is continued it repeats again and again. It's about 90% cortical or emotional and the rest physical. But one has to have the emotion or (in my case) I don't even want to begin or try.
9. ____ Obviously, we can't explain what it feels "like" because it feels "like" nothing else in human experience. A poetic description may well describe the emotions that go with it, but the physical "feeling" can only be described with very weak mechanical terminology. It is a release that occurs after a period of manipulation has sufficiently enabled internal, highly involuntary spasms that are pleasurable due to your complete involuntary control (no control).
10. ____ It's like shooting junk on a sunny day in a big, green, open field.

11. ___ It is like turning a water faucet on. You notice the oncoming flow but it can be turned on or off when desired. You feel the valves open and close and the fluid flow. An orgasm makes your head and body tingle.
12. ___ An orgasm . . . located (originating) in the genital area, capable of spreading out further . . . legs, abdomen. A sort of pulsating feeling — very nice if it can extend itself beyond the immediate genital area.
13. ___ A buildup of tension which starts to pulsate very fast, and then there is a sudden release from the tension and desire to sleep.
14. ___ Begins with tensing and tingling in anticipation, rectal contractions starting series of chills up spine. Tingling and buzzing sensations grow suddenly to explosion in genital area, some sensation of dizzying and weakening — almost loss of conscious sensation, but not really. Explosion sort of flowers out to varying distance from genital area, depending on intensity.
15. ___ A heightened feeling of excitement with severe, muscular tension especially through the back and legs, rigid straightening of the entire body for about 5 seconds, and a strong and general relaxation and very tired relieved feeling.
16. ___ A tremendous release of buildup tension all at once lasting around 5-10 seconds where a particular “pulsing” feeling is felt throughout my body along with a kind of tickling and tingling feeling.

Group B

1. ___ I really think it defies description by words. Combination of waves of very pleasurable sensations and mounting of tensions culminating in a fantastic sensation and release of tension.
2. ___ Physical tension and excitement climaxing and then a feeling of sighing, a release of tensionlike feeling.
3. ___ It is a pleasant, tension-relieving muscular contraction. It relieves physical tension and mental anticipation.
4. ___ It is a very pleasurable sensation. All my tensions have really built to a peak and are suddenly released. It feels like a great upheaval; like all of the organs in the stomach area have turned over. It is extremely pleasurable.
5. ___ Orgasm gives me a feeling of unobstructed intensity of satisfaction. Accompanied with the emotional feeling and love one has for another, the reality of the sex drive, and our culturally conditioned status on sex, an orgasm is the only experience that sends my whole body and mind into a state of beautiful oblivion.
6. ___ Tension builds to an extremely high level — muscle are tense, etc. There is a sudden expanding feeling in the pelvis and muscle spasms throughout the body followed by release of tension. Muscles relax and consciousness returns.

7. ___ A release of a very high level of tension, but ordinarily tension is unpleasant whereas the tension before orgasm is far from unpleasant.
8. ___ Basically it's an enormous buildup of tension, anxiety, strain followed by a period of total oblivion to sensation then a tremendous expulsion of the buildup with a feeling of wonderfulness and relief.
9. ___ Intense excitement of entire body. Vibrations in stomach-mind can consider only your own desires at the moment of climax. After, you feel like you're floating — a sense of joyful tiredness.
10. ___ It is a great release of tension followed by a sense of electriclike tingling which takes over all control of your senses.
11. ___ A building up of tensions — like getting ready for takeoff from a launching pad, then a sudden blossoming relief that extends all over the body.
12. ___ The feeling of orgasm in my opinion is a feeling of utmost relief of any type of tension. It is the most fulfilling experience I have ever had of enjoyment. The feeling is exuberant and the *most enjoyable* feeling I have ever experienced.
13. ___ I think that there are a variety of orgasms that I experience. I have noted a shallow "orgasm" which consists of a brief period which is characterized by an urge to thrust but which passes quickly. On the other hand, I have also experienced what I call a hard climax, characterized by a mounting, building tension and strong thrusting movements which increase in strength and frequency until the tension is relieved.
14. ___ An orgasm is a very quick release of sexual tension which results in a kind of flash of pleasure.
15. ___ An orgasm is a great release of tension with spasmodic reaction at the peak. This is exactly how it feels to me.
16. ___ A building of tension, sometimes, and frustration until the climax. A *tightening* inside, palpitating rhythm, explosion, and warmth and peace.

Group C

1. ___ An orgasm feels like heaven in the heat of hell; a tremendous buildup within of pleasure that makes the tremendous work of releasing that pleasure worthwhile.
2. ___ There is a building up of "tension" (poor description) to a very high stage. There is then a surging release which is exhilarating, leaving me in a totally relaxed, exhausted state.
3. ___ Spasm of the abdominal and groin area, tingling sensation in limbs, and throbbing at the temples on each side of my head.
4. ___ Experience of a buildup of tension, uncoordination of movement — to a few seconds of amazing feeling, to a release of tension and a period of satisfaction and relaxation.

5. ___ Often loss of contact with reality. All senses acute. Sight becomes patterns of color, but often very difficult to explain because words were made to fit in the real world.
6. ___ A feeling where nothing much else enters the mind other than that which relates to the present, oh sooo enjoyable and fulfilling sensation. It's like jumping into a cool swimming pool after hours of sweating turmoil. "Ahh Relief!" What a great feeling it was, so ecstatically wild and alright!
7. ___ A feeling of intense physical and mental satisfaction. The height of a sexual encounter. Words can hardly describe a feeling so great.
8. ___ Stomach muscles get "nervous" causing a thrusting movement with hips or pelvis. Muscular contraction all over the body.
9. ___ Building of tenseness to a peak where it seems as if everything is going to drain out of you. It's almost like a complete physical drain.
10. ___ Starts with hot-cold tingles up in the back of the thighs. What happens from there depends on the strength of the stimulation. Usually, shuddery contractions and the same sort of hot-cold feeling only in the genital area. Sometimes, with really strong stimulation, there's more of a blackout of complete mental awareness of what's happening, then a gradual letting down.
11. ___ An orgasm is a heightening relief of tension wherein the muscles are flexing and a great deal of tension is relieved in an extremely short period. It's a feeling of incurring climax and enjoyment due to the acute sensual nerve feelings and consciousness (kind of two opposing dialectics).
12. ___ Building up of a good type of tension. With the release of all this buildup in one great rush that makes your whole body tingle and feel very pleasurable. Feeling is weakening and is great. Just want to stay still for a long time.
13. ___ Has a buildup of pressure in genitals with involuntary thrusting of hips and twitching of thigh muscles. Also contracting and releasing of the genital muscles. The pressure becomes quite intense — like there is something underneath the skin of the genitals pushing out. Then there is a sudden release of the tension with contraction of genitals with a feeling of release and relaxation.
14. ___ I have had orgasm at times under certain conditions. I also have had it during intercourse. It is more relaxing with less mental duress during intercourse. It is a tensing of the whole body and a bright sensual feeling of release after.
15. ___ Orgasm amounts to a buildup of muscle tension accompanied by an increase in respiration rate. A sudden release of the buildup constitutes an orgasm. All in all, a highly pleasurable physical sensation.
16. ___ A complete relief of all tensions. Very powerful and filled with ecstasy. Contraction of stomach and back muscles.

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