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Comparing Orgasm Descriptions between the Sexes

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By

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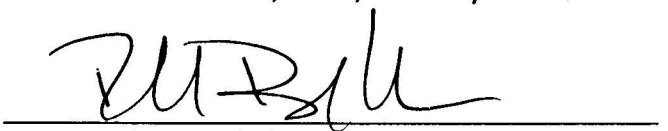

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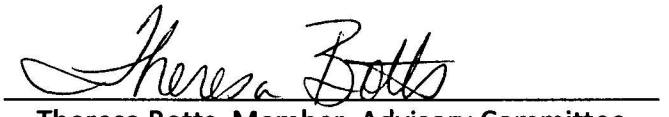

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the effects of sex and sexual context (masturbation or sexual intercourse) on characteristics present in descriptions of orgasms from 291 undergraduate participants aged 18 years or older, using the coding scheme presented in the Human Orgasm Model (Mah & Binik, 2001). Participants were asked to describe their most recent orgasm, and to designate whether the orgasm occurred during masturbation or sexual intercourse. Twenty men and 34 women achieved their orgasm through masturbation, and 47 men and 190 women achieved their orgasm through sexual intercourse. The Human Orgasm Model specifies 26 characteristics of orgasms, of which 25 were present in the orgasm descriptions. Descriptions were coded for the characteristics blind to the sex of the participant and sexual context (unless specified in the orgasm description) by two coders, who achieved percent agreement ratings of 85% and above; disagreements were settled through discussion. No characteristics were present in most of the descriptions, and 68% of the characteristics were present in less than 10% of the descriptions; in fact, the most common characteristic, Satisfaction, was present in only 37.8% of the orgasm descriptions. All effects were analyzed statistically via chi-square. Sex differences were present for only 3 characteristics: proportionally more women than men mentioned Whole Body Involvement, Rhythmic Sensations, and Thermal Sensations. The effects of sexual context were discerned for only 2 characteristics: proportionally, more participants who had masturbated described the orgasm as Intense, and fewer, as producing Satisfaction, compared to participants who had engaged in sexual intercourse. There were no sex differences discernible for any characteristics in the (small) sample of participants who achieved their orgasm through masturbation, and there were only two in the larger sample who achieved their orgasm through sexual intercourse: proportionally, more women than men described Whole Body Involvement and more men than women mentioned Joy—Elation. Effect sizes for all difference were small, suggesting that sex and sexual context have only minor effects on the experience of orgasm. Overall, orgasms appear to be similar between the sexes.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

TABLE PAGE

Chapter I.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines sex and sexual context differences in the description of orgasm. Undergraduate participants were asked to describe their most recent orgasm from either masturbation or sexual intercourse (sexual context), and these descriptions were examined for characteristics in the descriptions of the orgasm (e.g., it was pleasurable). The descriptions were then examined to see if some characteristics were more prominent with one sex than the other, or in one sexual context than the other. Prior to a more elaborate description of the study itself and its findings, a review of the literature on orgasms is presented, followed by predictions from this literature about sex and sexual context differences. (Although aware of the controversy over whether to characterize differences between men and women as "sex" or "gender" differences, I elected to call these sex differences given the many anatomical descriptions participants provided in their descriptions of their orgasms.)

Chapter II.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Orgasm

Orgasm, a common experience for most humans and (presumably) many nonhumans, is remarkably still mysterious, and relatively under-researched (Bancroft, 1989; Rosen & Beck, 1988). What is orgasm? According to *The Orgasm Answer Guide* (Komisaruk et al., 2010, p. 2), "an orgasm is a buildup of pleasurable body sensations and excitement to a peak intensity that then releases tensions and creates a feeling of satisfaction and relaxation." A problem with this definition is that it fails to distinguish the experience of orgasm from the experience of a ride on a roller coaster. A better working definition of orgasm is "the feeling one gets at the moment of sexual climax" (Meyers & Waller, 2009, pp. 146-147), though this definition leaves unarticulated exactly what that feeling is. Most definitions characterize orgasm as a "peak" condition during sexual experience, but these definitions may not distinguish orgasm sufficiently from an elevated state of sexual excitement (Mah & Binik, 2001).

One common physiological description comes from Alfred Kinsey and his famous study of 1948, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male*; in this definition, the key outcome of orgasm is "the abrupt release of the extreme tension which preceded the event and the rather sudden return to a normal or subnormal physiologic state after the event" (Kinsey, Pomeroy, & Martin, 1948, p. 158). In describing the experience of orgasm in

their work on women, Kinsey et al. (1953, p. 627) similarly states that orgasm is an "explosive discharge of neuromuscular tensions at the peak of sexual response." A similarly physiologically focused definition is supplied by Alzate (1985, p. 276): orgasm is the result of "cerebral neuronal discharge… elicited … by the accumulative effect on certain brain structures of appropriate stimuli originated in the peripheral erogenous zones." Happily for the current thesis, most adults seem to know what an orgasm is without elaborate definition.

It should not be surprising that there is no standardized measure of the psychological characteristics of orgasm (Meyers & Waller, 2009). Internal states can be difficult to describe, and typically people do not seem to spend a great deal of time discussing the nature of their orgasm with other people, given the taboos about discussing sexuality in our culture. Everyone knows, of course, that orgasm is a pleasurable experience, and orgasm clearly differs from other sensory experiences like tickles, aches, and pains in terms of being experienced as more positive (Wiest, 1977). The complexities in orgasmic experiences can differ widely even within the same person, but understanding the characteristics of both male and female orgasms may allow us to determine the extent of similarities and differences in orgasm experience between sexes.

Unfortunately, much of the research on physiological aspects of orgasm is somewhat dated, with little new research, and some of the research on orgasm itself

presumes that female orgasm is a diminished form or derivative of male orgasm. An androcentric bias is clearly present, as is a bias to see sex differences in orgasm.

Male Orgasm

Masters and Johnson (1966) described a widely used model of neurochemical feedback for the male orgasm. According to this model, a complete male orgasm consists of two phases: the emission phase and the ejaculation phase. The emission phase allows for sperm and seminal fluid to be expelled from the vas deferens, seminal vesicles, and prostate gland into the prostatic urethra, causing it to expand. The ejaculation phase is characterized by the ejection of semen from contractions of the prostatic urethra and the bulbocavernosal and ischiocavernosal muscles; the term "ejaculation" is commonly used to describe all characteristics (emission, ejaculation, and orgasm) of the male orgasm experience. Not only is there a distinction between emission and ejaculation, but some investigators believe there is a distinction between ejaculation and orgasm (e.g., Alexander, Sipski, & Findley, 1993; Brackett et al., 1998; Levine, Zachary, & Gottlieb, 1993). This distinction creates the foundation for the belief that men are just as capable of achieving multiple orgasms as women are (see discussion of multiple orgasms below).

When observing the variations in orgasm descriptions of both males and females, scores on a component representing ejaculatory sensations were significantly higher for males than females (Mah & Binik, 2001). However, ejaculatory sensations may not be the essence of male orgasm as it has often been represented to be.

Grouping the experiences of emission, ejaculation and orgasm presents the male orgasm as a reduced version of itself, and reflects the viewpoint of male orgasm in previous literature as a much simpler process than it is.

Female Orgasm

Female orgasms have been classified into two types: surface orgasms or deep orgasms. Orgasms can be labeled as either *surface* or *deep* according to distinguishable differences between the sensations and locations of each type (King & Belsky, 2012). The surface orgasms, which focus on the surface of the genitalia, are also referred to as clitoral orgasms; whereas the "deep" orgasms, which are associated with internal sensations, are commonly regarded as the more "mature" vaginal orgasm (Vance & Wagner, 1976). However, the original basis for this so-called "maturity" of the vaginal orgasm derives from Freud's (1932) inaccurate idea that women, to become feminine (and heterosexual), must transfer the feelings of sexual stimulation from the clitoris to the vagina.

Stimulation of the clitoris has been cited as the leading source of pleasure that generates orgasm (e.g., Darling et al., 1991; Hite, 1976; Masters & Johnson, 1966), though one research group argues that orgasms that derive from deep penile-vaginal penetration without clitoral stimulation are healthier (Brody et al., 2011). A majority of women in Fisher's (1973) study claimed that clitoral stimulation is important for achieving orgasm, and women rated clitoral stimulation as at least somewhat more important than vaginal stimulation in achieving orgasm. However, there are no

distinguishable biological differences between clitoral and vaginal orgasms (Fisher, 1973; Kinsey et al., 1953).

During arousal, the anterior third of the vagina becomes vasocongested to form the foundation of sexual climax (Masters & Johnson, 1966). This vasocongestion may not return to baseline as quickly in female orgasm as men return to baseline in male orgasm (Geer & Quartararo, 1976; Gillian & Brindley, 1979; Henson, Rubin, & Henson, 1982). This phenomenon may explain why women show a greater skill at achieving multiple orgasms than men do (Mah & Binik, 2001). King and Belsky (2012) posit that "deep" orgasms influence sperm movement to facilitate insemination, yet the physiological changes that occur during female orgasm do not appear to enable sperm retention or insemination (Baker & Bellis, 1993a; 1993b; Singh et al., 1998).

Orgasm Characteristics of Both Sexes

Though there have been many theories describing the patterns of body responses for each sex during orgasm, there are some basic bodily characteristics of orgasm that are prevalent in the experiences of both male and female orgasm. For example, body rigidity, muscle spasms, vocalizations, sweating, hyperventilation, rocking pelvic motions, and shuddering have been reported during orgasm in men and women (Hite, 1976; 1981).

Fundamental orgasm description characteristics by males and females seem to share more similarities than differences, but some researchers maintain the assumption

that some reported orgasm characteristics are more typical in one sex than another. Operating under the assumption that a male's orgasm tends to be more abrupt and explosive and a female's orgasm is typically more delayed and less violent, researchers set out to determine if judges were able to determine the sex of participants when reading his or her orgasm description. The written descriptions had all gender-related cues neutralized before being analyzed by psychologists, medical students, and obstetrician-gynecologists; judges detected no recognizable differences between the descriptions of orgasms given by males and females other than the occurrence of multiple orgasms for women (Vance & Wagner, 1976).

Multiple Orgasms

One purported difference between male orgasm and female orgasm is the ability for women to achieve multiple orgasms more easily than men. However, it is not clear how many women are multiply orgasmic; the percentage ranges across studies from 12% (Masters & Johnson, 1966) to 32% (Kaplan, 1974). By contrast, as many as 55% of preadolescent males (though only 3% of adult males) reported multiple orgasms in Kinsey's landmark studies, whereas only 14% of females did (Kinsey et al., 1948; 1953), though in reading these studies it is unclear how similar the experience of multiple orgasm described is between most men and women. In addition, one male subject sought out for his skill at multiple orgasms described experiences of usually 3-10, but up to 30, orgasms prior to ejaculation (Robbins & Jensen, 1978); some researchers are critical of these data (Mah & Binik, 2001).

Methodologies

While recognizing the many inherent problems with self-report measures, many studies collect information about participant orgasm using by asking subjects to rate how accurately a list of adjectives or descriptions describe his or her experience of orgasm (e.g., van Anders & Dunn, 2009; Mah & Binik, 2005; Wiest, 1977). One research investigation asked participants detailed, somewhat leading questions, derived from theory, about his or her orgasm experience; e.g., female participants were asked if they experience internal sucking sensations when experiencing orgasm during intercourse, to see if such experiences could help sperm insemination (King & Belsky, 2012). Several researchers have used self-report measures that require an open-ended type of response (Vance & Wagner, 1976). Investigators sometimes interview participants in a face-to-face setting to collect information about orgasm experiences (King & Belsky, 2012; Zucker et al., 2004).

Vaginal orgasms have been claimed to be healthier for women, based on a diversity of research from one laboratory (see, e.g., Brody et al., 2011). One piece of research compared the gaits of women with a history of vaginal orgasm experiences to the gaits of women who have a history of vaginal anorgasmia (Nicholas et al., 2008). The women were asked to complete a preliminary questionnaire on sexual behavior and indicate their willingness to be contacted for further study; 7 women with known histories of achieving vaginal orgasm and 9 with known histories of vaginal anorgasmia were later videotaped walking down a street and judges (blind to the women's orgasmic

history) were asked to rate them on their orgasmic status. The evidence used was "a global impression of women's free, fluid, energetic, sensual manner of walking (with an emphasis on energy flow through the rotation of the pelvis and spine)" (p. 2121). Trained sexologist judges were able to correctly infer whether or not a woman had experienced vaginal orgasm based on perceptions of her confidence while walking. However, it may well be that women who enjoy sexual experiences express their interest in their walking, whereas women who do not enjoy sexual experiences do not.

Themes in Descriptions of Orgasm: The Human Orgasm Model

An intricate theoretical three-component model of the psychological experience of orgasm with subcomponents and representative adjectives was constructed by Mah and Binik (2001). The Human Orgasm Model posits 26 different characteristics that can be present in orgasm experiences. The three primary components in the model represent the sensory, evaluative, and affective aspects of orgasm. Each component comprises many items commonly used in orgasm descriptions (as in the original definitions presented at the beginning of this thesis), each of which can be coded for using specific key words and words relating-to or synonymous with these terms (see Appendix).

According to the Human Orgasm Model, sensory aspects include: *Buildup of Tension*, coded with terms like "rising," "building," and "swelling"; *Release of Tension*, coded with terms like "relieving," "releasing," "erupting," and "exploding"; *Spreading Sensations*, coded with terms like "flowing," "spreading," and "radiating"; *Whole-Body*

Involvement, coded with terms like “trembling” and “shuddering”; *Ejaculatory Sensations*, coded with terms like “oozing,” “spurting,” and “shooting”; *Rhythmic Sensations*, coded with terms like “quivering,” “pulsating,” and “throbbing”; *Miscellaneous (Sensory)*, coded with terms like “tickling,” “tingling,” and “flushing”; and *Thermal Sensations*, coded with terms like “cool,” “warm,” and “hot.”

Evaluative aspects of the Human Orgasm Model include: *Feeling of Inevitability*, coded with terms like “inevitable”; *Temporal Evaluation*, coded with terms like “quick,” “long,” and “unending”; *Intensity*, coded with terms like “mild,” “moderate,” “intense,” and “powerful”; *Physical Effects*, coded with terms like “relaxing,” “engulfing,” and “exhausting”; *Depth*, coded with terms like “deep,” “full,” and “complete”; *Global Pleasure*, coded with terms like “pleasant,” “enjoyable,” “pleasurable,” and “incredible”; *Sensual Pleasure*, coded with terms like “soothing,” “sweet,” “sensual,” and “exquisite”; *Satisfaction*, coded with terms like “satisfying,” “gratifying,” “fulfilling,” and “cathartic”; and *Excitement*, coded with terms like “exhilarating,” “exciting,” and “wild.”

The third component of the Human Orgasm Model represents affective aspects, which include: *Emotional Intimacy*, coded with terms like “close” and “loving”; *Joy-Peacefulness*, coded with terms like “peaceful,” “blissful,” and “tender”; *Joy-Elation*, coded with terms like “elated,” “ecstatic,” “euphoric,” “rapturous,” and “passionate”; *Emotional Excitation*, coded with terms like “abandoned” and “uncontrolled”; *Emotional Fusion*, coded with terms like “immersing,” “merging,” and “unifying”; *Miscellaneous (Affective)*, coded with terms like “melting” and “vulnerable”; *Suspension*, coded with

terms like “suspended” and “soaring”; *Lack of Awareness of Surround*, coded with terms like “detached,” “oblivious,” and “unreal”; and *Unreality* (sic!), coded with terms like “light-headed,” and “dizzy.” The terminology from this model is used in this study to characterize orgasmic descriptions.

Some Bases for Sex Differences in Orgasm Experience

Generally, most men acknowledge that they experience orgasm. By contrast, not all women say that they experience orgasm. Many studies suggest that males are able to, and therefore do, achieve orgasm more regularly than females (Mah & Binik, 2001). Due to insufficient information from parents and school sex-education courses, a large number of women do not know the anatomical locations of their own clitoris, which limits its use for masturbatory orgasms, but they can be easily taught (Wade, Kremer, & Brown, 2005). Some individuals have great difficulty in reaching orgasm, or are unable to reach orgasm at all either due to physical and/or psychological matters. Being unable to reach sexual climax or experiencing low orgasm-consistency (the likelihood that an individual will be able to achieve orgasm) is much more prevalent in women than in men. However, some women’s difficulties may derive from the widespread practice by doctors of cliteridectomy and clitoral surgeries for female infants born with an enlarged clitoris; this practice diminishes the sexual feelings available when these infants become mature (May, Boyle, & Grant, 1996).

For both men and women, more extensive concurrent exposure to androgens increases orgasm intensity, and usually men have more testosterone in their system

than women do. Sexual activity increased the levels of testosterone in some women (van Anders & Dunn, 2009), and androgens have reinforcing properties in females (Wood, 2004); these women also report more frequent orgasms, perhaps due to the increase in pleasurable reward that higher testosterone levels provide. Women with high levels of testosterone also showed higher interest in sexual stimuli and more sexual interest in general (Rupp & Wallen, 2007; van Anders & Dunn, 2009).

Psychosocial factors may be the principal catalysts of the subjective feelings of orgasm in women, including pleasure and satisfaction (Levin, 1981). Anorgasmic individuals, typically female, tend to report more self-blame attributions (Mah & Binik, 2001), lending support to the theory that orgasm difficulties may be primarily psychological. Men's experience of orgasm has been given less attention than women's, but evidence suggests that men's orgasmic experiences are also subject to psychosocial influences (Dunn & Trost, 1989). Sexual passion can be an important component of sexual functioning, and some theorists posit different types of orgasm a woman may experience based on her passion (King & Belsky, 2012), though the evidence is slight and the methodology problematic. Passion (coded as "Joy—Elation" in the Human Orgasm Model) may create specific feelings of pleasure that can influence how an individual interprets the intensity of his or her orgasm. Conversely, feelings of inhibition about the potential sexual act or the sexual act a woman is engaged in can alter her sexual interest; knowledge of the consequences of sex (pregnancy, sexually-transmitted diseases, etc.) or inhibitions about satisfactory self-performance can affect a woman's

ability to become fully aroused (Graham et al., 2004; May, Boyle, & Grant, 1996). Similar inhibitions can be assumed to have developed in men as well; however, few studies focus on the psychological aspects involved in men's orgasms.

The debate about the biological function of the female orgasm has been fueled by the fact that successful reproduction occurs in many species without the notable presence of female orgasm. Because female orgasm is not a necessity for human sexual reproduction, it is reasonable to suppose that the orgasm experienced by women may not be comparable to that experienced by men in terms of pleasurable reward.

From an evolutionary standpoint, there are many theories trying to explain why men and women both *can* experience orgasm. The male orgasm usually accompanies ejaculation of seminal fluids containing sperm, and is therefore likely to induce repetition of the act that produces both orgasm and ejaculation. The purpose and evolutionary function of the female orgasm, on the other hand, is less clear-cut. Female orgasms have been theorized to have emerged as a by-product of male adaptation: as evolution produced males with more sensitive penises to reward males having intercourse, clitorises (which are homologous with penises) were also compelled to develop with similar sensitive genital structures (Gould, 1987).

Some evolutionary scholars claim that female orgasm has emerged as a result of natural selection focused on an increase in reproductive fitness, i.e., the dispersion of genes in future generations (Baker & Bellis, 1993a, 1993b; Thornhill, Gangestad, & Comer, 1995). One adaptationist theory is that female orgasm is a female choice

mechanism, enabling higher rate of conception based on her aided harvesting of sperm (via her orgasm) from the preferred mate (Baker & Bellis, 1993a, 1993b). Similar theories also breed the idea that female orgasm involves suction or "insuck," a pressure change in the uterus that allows the female to pull sperm from preferred mates more effectively (Fox, 1976; King & Belsky, 2012).

A widespread assumption in the field of sexual research is that there are significant differences between a male's experience of orgasm and a female's experience of orgasm (see discussion in Vance & Wagner, 1976). The key differences lie in the descriptions that men and women use to describe their orgasms: when rating the extent of their experience of given characteristics, men gave higher ratings to Shooting Sensations, whereas women gave higher ratings to Rhythmic Sensations (specifically throbbing and spasms), Spreading Sensations, and Buildup of Tension (Mah & Binik, 2002). When it comes to marked differences between the orgasms experienced by males and females, women's descriptions suggest that their orgasms as less Intense than men's (though higher in passion: King & Belsky, 2012, which is coded as Joy—Elation) and as more variable in location (penis for men, clitoris or vagina for women) (Hite, 1976). Differences in orgasm experiences may not occur strictly *between* sexes, however; it is possible that the experience of orgasm in one man (or woman) can differ greatly from, or can be completely different than, another man's (or woman's) experience (Meyers & Waller, 2009).

Considering how complex the female orgasm has been proposed to be, there remains much similarity between the subjective self-reports of male and female orgasm descriptions, when analyzed through the lens of written language (Wiest, 1977). In order to compare the descriptions of orgasms between the sexes, obvious references to sex-specific structures must be removed or made ambiguous (or neutral) to ensure that certain terms would not expose a judge or researcher to the sex of the respondent. When Proctor, Wagner and Butler (1974) asked judges to compare neutralized orgasm descriptions of men and women, the judges were unable to reliably identify which descriptions were male and which female experiences (see also a similar finding in Vance & Wagner, 1976). If sex differences are inherent, genital structures function differently for men and women, and only male orgasms are deemed "necessary" for biological purposes, then why do the written descriptions of orgasms between men and women seem relatively interchangeable?

Sexual Context

The sexual context in which orgasm occurs, i.e., through masturbation (solitary) or sexual intercourse (social), may also influence the orgasmic experiences. Few studies have focused on this dimension. Mah and Binik (2002) used ordinal ratings by participants of the extent their experience, during orgasm from both masturbation and sexual intercourse, of characteristics provided from the Human Orgasm Model. Participants rated Satisfaction, General Pleasure, Emotional Intimacy, Shooting

Sensations, and Rhythmic Sensations (specifically general spasms) as more extensive in sexual intercourse than in masturbation.

Hypotheses

The purpose of the present study is to test hypotheses concerning the terms used in descriptions of self-created descriptions of orgasms experienced by men and women, as a result of engaging in either sex with a partner or masturbation. Whether there are differences in men's and women's descriptions of their orgasms was assessed using terms from the Human Orgasm Model of Mah and Binik (2001). The literature about orgasm to some degree supports the following hypotheses:

When describing orgasm experiences,

1. Men and women will generally describe similar characteristics;
2. Proportionally, more men will mention Intensity and Ejaculatory Sensations, and proportionally more women will mention Buildup of Tension, Spreading Sensations, Joy—Elation, and Rhythmic Sensations; and
3. Proportionally, more participants who engaged in sexual intercourse will mention Satisfaction, General Pleasure, Shooting Sensations, Rhythmic Sensations, Emotional Intimacy, and Emotional Fusion, compared to participants who masturbated (the last two characteristics are difficult to envision for masturbation).

Chapter III.

METHODS

Participants

Participants were 300 Eastern Kentucky University undergraduate psychology students, 68 males and 232 females aged 18 years or older, who received course credit for their participation in the study. The students signed up for and participated in the study online using the SONA system, having been informed on SONA that the study concerned their experience of orgasm. Oddly, given the study's description, 1 man and 8 women signed up for the study, yet indicated that they had not experienced orgasm. They were, thus, excluded from any analyses (other than reliability). Of the 291 participants who provided orgasm descriptions, 20 males and 34 females achieved orgasm through masturbation, and 47 males and 190 females achieved orgasm through some form of sexual intercourse. Compared to chance levels, more males had their most recent orgasm via masturbation, and more females, via sexual intercourse (chi-square (df = 1) =7.35, p = .007), though most males (70.1%) and most females (84.8%) had achieved their last orgasm through sexual intercourse.

Materials

The data were collected in 2011 by a female graduate student at EKU, who created the online questionnaire, wrote the proposal for IRB, and received IRB approval to enact the study. On the online questionnaire, participants were asked for their sex, and were then

asked, “In considering your most recent orgasm, please describe the experience in as much detail as possible.” Following this description, they were asked, “Was this orgasm achieved through masturbation or sexual intercourse?”

Procedure

All data were collected using the SONA system. Participants signed up to participate in the study, and submitted their answers to the questionnaire, online. Upon submission of all 300 surveys, the study ended, and participants were given a debriefing form.

Two coders (blind to sex and method of achievement of the orgasm, except when specified in the orgasm description) independently coded all of the descriptions of orgasm according to the 26 characteristics of orgasm in the three-dimensional model constructed by Mah and Binik (2001). These are described in the Results, along with the initial reliability scores. Both coders, one the author of this thesis and the other his graduate thesis chair, were familiar with the literature on orgasm. Given that the characteristics provided by Mah and Binik (2001) are never elaborated more fully than providing cognates of the general term for any characteristic, both coders used their knowledge of English to assess the relevance of any given characteristic to an orgasm description. Reliability scores (provided in the Results) are the total number of the 300 orgasm descriptions that the coders agreed on (presence or absence) for each characteristic of orgasm, divided by 300. The two coders conferred on disagreements, and agreed on all the final codes.

Data Analysis

Frequency of presence or absence of each of the characteristics of orgasm described in the Human Orgasm Model (see Appendix) were examined using chi-square in relation to the sex of the participants, and in relation to the form of sexual experience (intercourse or masturbation). In addition, sex differences were examined for each characteristic for those who engaged in sexual intercourse separately from those who engaged in masturbation to achieve their orgasm. Perhaps because there were so few who engaged in masturbation, there were no significant sex differences in the frequency with which each of the different characteristics was mentioned by masturbators. Because no one had any orgasm description that satisfied the "Miscellaneous" characteristic (i.e., melting, vulnerable) of the affective component, only 25 of the 26 characteristics could be analyzed.

Chapter IV.

RESULTS

The results and tables appear in the following order: frequencies and proportions of characteristics of orgasm overall, in relation to a sex difference, in relation to sexual context, i.e., intercourse or masturbation, and in relation to sex differences for those who achieved their orgasm during sexual intercourse. (Note that "sexual intercourse" is intended to include any form of social sexual experience.) As noted in the Methods, there were no statistically significant sex differences in the frequencies with which masturbators offered any given characteristic of orgasm in their descriptions.

Overall

One point to acknowledge about the orgasm descriptions is that coding of the characteristics was not a seamless activity. The characteristics from the Human Orgasm Model are relatively unspecified, and sometimes confusing. For example, Mah and Binik (2001) include the subcategory of "unreal" in the characteristic "Lack of Awareness of Surround," not in the characteristic "Unreality" (which I renamed "Unreality/ Disorientation" given their subtypes "dizzy" and "light-headed"). In addition, it is unclear whether to include ecstasy and euphoric under General Pleasure or Joy—Elation, or both (in this thesis it is included under both). Is a "rush of endorphins" a psychological description? (Can one really experience directly?) The choices made as to which terms

to include under which characteristic are available in the Appendix. Although both coders were generally consistent in their detection of the presence or absence of a characteristic, both found it helpful to discuss some descriptions in relation to particular characteristics.

Another point to acknowledge is that some participants did not satisfy the task of describing their orgasm *per se*. Some described solely the behavioral aspects of their sexual encounter in limited ("Missionary"), more extensive ("My partner and I have awesome mind-blowing sex. It only takes a minute for me to have an orgasm"), or great detail ("I met up with this girl, we'll call her Sally. As soon as we met up, she was all over me, like rubbing my shaft. So, we went back to my place and went buck wild. We banged and she blew me and I straight came all in her face. It was glorious"). Some offered critiques of their partner's sexual prowess ("Boring, kind of like a robot, not much foreplay") or their own orgasm ("less than average," "just a normal orgasm"), and some provided quite limited descriptions of orgasm ("it happened," "good," "it was great," "tingly," "relaxed release").

Thus, it may not be surprising that none of the characteristics of orgasm was described by most participants (see Table 1). The most frequent characteristic of orgasm described was satisfaction, but this was supplied in the descriptions of less than 40% of participants. Global pleasure was the next most frequent characteristic, accounting for only just over a quarter of the participants' responses. Intensity, Physical Effects (mostly expressing relaxation, relief, and tiredness), Whole Body Involvement, and

Miscellaneous Sensations (mostly tingling or feeling numb), were each present in about 20% of the descriptions. Release of Tension was mentioned by only 15% of the participants, and Buildup of Tension by only 11%. All the rest of the characteristics were mentioned by fewer than 10% of the participants. Participants may have failed to mention some characteristics of their orgasm, such as the pleasurable aspects, because they were taking their presence for granted. In addition, the participants were asked to describe only their most recent orgasm, not provide an overall summary of all the orgasms they have experienced.

Table 1. Frequency and percentage of the categories offered in the orgasm descriptions from the 291 participants.

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Buildup of Tension	31	10.7
Release of Tension	43	14.8
Spreading Sensations	28	9.6
Whole Body Involvement	55	18.9
Ejaculatory Sensations	5	1.7
Rhythmic Sensations	25	8.6
Miscellaneous Sensations	57	19.6
Thermal Sensations	28	9.6
Feelings of Inevitability	16	5.5
Temporal Evaluation	15	5.2
Intensity	59	20.3
Physical Effects	58	19.9
Depth	8	2.7

Table 1 (continued).

Characteristic	Frequency	Percentage
Global Pleasure	78	26.8
Sensual Pleasure	18	6.2
Satisfaction	110	37.8
Excitement	23	7.9
Emotional Intimacy	9	3.1
Joy—Peacefulness	8	2.7
Joy—Elation	23	7.9
Emotional Excitement	16	5.5
Emotional Fusion	3	1.0
Unreality/Disorientation	13	4.5
Lack of Awareness of Surround	10	3.4
Suspension	3	1.0

Sex Differences

Few sex differences appeared in the descriptions of orgasms, and all but one of the characteristics were mentioned by both male and female participants (see Table 2). There were only 3 sex differences: proportionally more females than males mentioned whole Body Involvement, Rhythmic Sensations, and Thermal Sensations. Note that most participants, male or female, did *not* use these (or any other) characteristics to describe their orgasms. Of the sex differences detected, only Rhythmic Sensations (like throbbing) were expected to show sex differences, based on previous research. However, all three phi coefficients indicate only a small effect of the sex of the participants. Note that some females as well as some males described Ejaculatory Sensations, though very few of either sex did.

Suspension, a characteristic mentioned exclusively by females, was mentioned by only 3 participants. Perhaps with more participants at least some males will describe an experience of floating or soaring during orgasm.

Table 2. Frequency (and percentage) of characteristics of the 67 males and 224 females who provided orgasm descriptions, as well as chi-square and phi coefficient values.§

Characteristic	Male	Female	Chi-square	Phi
Buildup of Tension	7 (10.5)	24 (10.7)	<0.01	
Release of Tension	13 (19.4)	40 (17.9)	0.08	
Spreading Sensations	7 (10.5)	21 (9.4)	0.07	
Whole Body Involvement	7 (10.5)	48 (21.4)	4.06*	.12
Ejaculatory Sensations	2 (3.0)	3 (1.3)	0.14	
Rhythmic Sensations	1 (1.5)	24 (10.7)	5.59*	.14
Miscellaneous Sensations	15 (22.4)	42 (18.8)	0.43	
Thermal Sensations	2 (3.0)	26 (11.6)	4.41*	.12
Feelings of Inevitability	4 (6.0)	12 (5.4)	<0.01	
Temporal Evaluation	4 (6.0)	11 (4.9)	<0.01	
Intensity	12 (17.9)	47 (21.0)	0.30	
Physical Effects	11 (16.4)	47 (21.0)	0.67	
Depth	3 (4.5)	5 (2.2)	0.32	

Table 2 (continued).

Characteristic	Male	Female	Chi-square	Phi
Global Pleasure	20 (29.9)	58 (25.9)	0.41	
Sensual Pleasure	2 (3.0)	16 (7.1)	0.91	
Satisfaction	28 (41.8)	82 (36.6)	0.59	
Excitement	4 (6.0)	19 (8.5)	0.45	
Emotional Intimacy	3 (4.5)	6 (2.7)	0.12	
Joy—Peacefulness	2 (3.0)	6 (2.7)	<0.01	
Joy—Elation	9 (13.4)	14 (6.3)	3.66	
Emotional Excitement	3 (4.5)	13 (5.8)	0.01	
Emotional Fusion	1 (1.5)	2 (0.9)	<0.01	
Unreality/Disorientation	2 (3.0)	11 (4.9)	0.11	
Lack of Awareness of Surround	5 (7.5)	5 (2.2)	2.83	
Suspension	0 (0.0)	3 (1.3)	0.07	

§ Chi-square values (df = 1) are corrected for continuity when expected values are less than 5 for any cell. Phi coefficients are presented only for significant differences.

*$p < .05$

Sexual context

Whether participants experienced orgasm through masturbation or sexual intercourse had little impact on the characteristics of orgasm they thought to mention (see Table 3). There were only two sexual context differences: proportionally more of the participants who engaged in masturbation than those who engaged in sexual intercourse described the Intensity of their orgasm, and proportionally more of the participants who engaged in sexual intercourse than those who engaged in masturbation described the Satisfaction they experienced from their orgasm. (Once again, the phi coefficients indicate small effects.) These differences seem commonsensically "explained": whereas sexual intercourse might be more satisfying in many respects than masturbation, an agent masturbating is likely to be more in tune with the prerequisites for making his or her own orgasm as intense as possible than would be others in producing the same effect.

Some characteristics—Feelings of Inevitability, Emotional Intimacy, Emotional Fusion, and Suspension—were never described for solitary sexual experiences. For most of these, their absence is not surprising: it is impossible to have emotional intimacy or emotion fusion when alone, and someone masturbating is likely less aware of the inevitability of orgasm, as that is what they set out to achieve. Suspension, however, could occur during masturbation, but it was rarely mentioned even in the context of sexual intercourse.

Table 3. Frequency (and percentage) of characteristics of the 237 socially orgasmic and 54 solitarily orgasmic participants who provided orgasm descriptions, as well as chi-square and phi coefficient values.§

Characteristic	Social	Solitary	Chi-square	Phi
Buildup of Tension	24 (10.1)	7 (13.0)	0.37	
Release of Tension	42 (17.7)	11 (20.4)	0.21	
Spreading Sensations	23 (9.7)	5 (9.3)	0.01	
Whole Body Involvement	48 (20.3)	7 (13.0)	1.53	
Ejaculatory Sensations	3 (1.3)	2 (3.7)	0.44	
Rhythmic Sensations	19 (8.0)	6 (11.1)	0.22	
Miscellaneous Sensations	46 (19.4)	11 (20.4)	0.03	
Thermal Sensations	21 (8.9)	7 (13.0)	0.85	
Feelings of Inevitability	16 (6.8)	0 (0.0)	2.67	
Temporal Evaluation	10 (4.2)	5 (9.3)	1.37	
Intensity	42 (17.7)	17 (31.5)	5.15*	.13
Physical Effects	46 (19.4)	12 (22.2)	0.22	
Depth	7 (3.0)	1 (1.9)	<0.01	

Table 3 (continued).

Characteristic	Social	Solitary	Chi-square	Phi
Global Pleasure	64 (27.0)	14 (25.9)	0.03	
Sensual Pleasure	17 (7.2)	1 (1.9)	1.33	
Satisfaction	96 (40.5)	14 (25.9)	3.98*	.12
Excitement	16 (6.8)	7 (13.0)	1.56	
Emotional Intimacy	9 (3.8)	0 (0.0)	1.04	
Joy—Peacefulness	6 (2.5)	2 (3.7)	<0.01	
Joy—Elation	19 (8.0)	4 (7.4)	<0.01	
Emotional Excitement	14 (5.9)	2 (3.7)	0.10	
Emotional Fusion	3 (1.3)	0 (0.0)	<0.01	
Unreality/Disorientation	9 (3.8)	4 (7.4)	0.63	
Lack of Awareness of Surround	8 (3.4)	2 (3.7)	<0.01	
Suspension	3 (1.3)	0 (0.0)	<0.01	

§ Chi-square values (df = 1) are corrected for continuity when expected values are less than 5 for any cell. Phi coefficients are presented only for significant differences.

*$p < .05$

Sex Differences in Orgasm during Sexual Intercourse

There were only two sex differences in the descriptions of orgasms that occurred during sexual intercourse (see Table 4). Whole Body Involvement again showed a significant sex difference, as it did when sexual context was ignored, with proportionally more women describing it than men. This finding is not surprising given that few participants described Whole Body Involvement in the orgasm they had experienced while masturbating. This finding might be explained by the fact that sexual intercourse tends to be more focused on one's overall body than does masturbation, which focuses more restrictedly (though not necessarily exclusively) on the genitals. By contrast, proportionally more men than women described Joy—Elation (extreme pleasure or happiness) from sexual intercourse. Once again, the phi coefficients indicate small effects from sex for these characteristics.

Table 4. Frequency (and percentage) of characteristics of the 47 males and 190 females who provided descriptions of orgasms that they had during a social sexual encounter, as well as chi-square and phi coefficient values.§

Characteristic	Male	Female	Chi-square	Phi
Buildup of Tension	6 (12.8)	18 (9.4)	0.45	
Release of Tension	10 (21.3)	32 (16.8)	0.51	
Spreading Sensations	7 (14.9)	16 (8.4)	1.14	
Whole Body Involvement	4 (8.5)	44 (23.2)	5.01*	.15
Ejaculatory Sensations	2 (4.3)	1 (0.5)	1.75	
Rhythmic Sensations	1 (2.1)	18 (9.5)	1.86	
Miscellaneous Sensations	10 (21.3)	36 (18.9)	0.13	
Thermal Sensations	2 (4.3)	19 (10.0)	0.91	
Feelings of Inevitability	4 (8.5)	12 (6.3)	0.05	
Temporal Evaluation	1 (2.1)	9 (4.7)	0.16	
Intensity	8 (17.0)	34 (17.9)	0.02	
Physical Effects	5 (10.6)	41 (21.6)	2.88	
Depth	2 (4.3)	5 (2.6)	0.01	

Table 4 (continued).

Characteristic	Male	Female	Chi-square	Phi
Global Pleasure	16 (34.0)	48 (25.3)	1.47	
Sensual Pleasure	1 (2.1)	16 (8.4)	1.40	
Satisfaction	21 (44.7)	75 (39.5)	0.42	
Excitement	2 (4.3)	14 (7.4)	0.19	
Emotional Intimacy	3 (6.4)	6 (3.2)	0.37	
Joy—Peacefulness	1 (2.1)	5 (2.6)	<0.01	
Joy—Elation	8 (17.0)	11 (5.8)	5.02*	.17
Emotional Excitement	2 (4.3)	12 (6.3)	0.04	
Emotional Fusion	1 (2.1)	2 (1.1)	<0.01	
Unreality/Disorientation	1 (2.1)	8 (4.2)	0.06	
Lack of Awareness of Surround	3 (6.4)	5 (2.6)	0.68	
Suspension	0 (0.0)	3 (1.6)	0.02	

§ Chi-square values (df = 1) are corrected for continuity when expected values are less than 5 for any cell. Phi coefficients are presented only for significant differences.

*$p < .05$

Chapter V.

DISCUSSION

The pattern of results supports the hypothesis that, overall, males and females do not differ remarkably from one another when it comes to the terms used in descriptions of orgasm experiences. However, females were more likely to use terms relating to Whole-Body Involvement, Rhythmic Sensations, and Thermal Sensations in describing orgasm experiences compared to males. But most participants of either sex never mentioned these characteristics (or, indeed, any others). In addition, although only females described Suspension during orgasm (and all during sexual intercourse), this characteristic was rarely mentioned.

Contrary to prediction, men did not differ significantly from women in the likelihood of using terms relating to Intensity or Ejaculatory Sensations (although their mention was rare by persons of either sex). Of the four characteristics which women were expected to be more likely than men to use (Buildup of Tension, Spreading Sensations, Joy—Elation, and Rhythmic Sensations), only Rhythmic Sensations was mentioned more commonly by women than men. Whole Body Involvement and Thermal Sensations were also more frequently mentioned by women than by man in the current study, though not in earlier studies. The fact that different studies, using convenience samples, come up with diverse findings suggests that the experience of orgasm within sexes is variably described by participants, such that determination of any consistent differences between the sexes is unlikely.

The sexual context had a limited influence on the characteristics present in descriptions of orgasm. Except for the greater prevalence of Satisfaction for those engaging in sexual intercourse compared to those engaging in masturbation, none of the other predicted characteristics (General Pleasure, Shooting Sensations, Rhythmic Sensations, Emotional Intimacy, and Emotional Fusion) showed statistically significantly greater frequencies for sexual intercourse than for masturbation. However, four of the characteristics that were mentioned as occurring by some participants for orgasm during sexual intercourse were never described as occurring for orgasm during masturbation: Feelings of Inevitability, Emotional Intimacy, Emotional Fusion, and Suspension. For all but the last characteristic, these findings are not surprising; and, as noted earlier, Suspension was mentioned rarely.

The facts that more participants described orgasms during masturbation than during sexual intercourse as Intense, and that more participants described orgasms during sexual intercourse than during masturbation as resulting in Satisfaction, may have more to do with semantics than experience. Participants' uses of terminology like "awesome," "amazing," "beyond pleasurable," "wonderful," and "fantastic," all of which were categorized as Satisfaction, could have been intended to describe how Intense the orgasm felt, such that the resulting differences based on sexual context might disappear.

Men and women showed no differences in their characterizations of orgasm during masturbation (though the sample size was small), and few differences in their

characterizations of orgasm during sexual intercourse. In their orgasms during sexual intercourse, more women noted Whole Body Involvement, and more men noted Joy—Elation. One could elaborate ideas as to why these differences occurred, but, given that the proportions of both characteristics were low (less than 24%), the effect sizes were small, and some representatives of each sex experienced these characteristics, it seems best to wait for corroboration of these differences in other studies.

Limitations

As noted in the preceding discussion of coding words to designate characteristics of Intense vs. Satisfaction, the coding for each orgasm description proved to be somewhat complicated. Some characteristics in the Human Orgasm Model of Mah and Binik (2001) were problematic for coders because an orgasm description sometimes contained terms that could be coded into more than one category based on the examples given by these authors, or because the authors provided odd examples (e.g., the characteristic "Lack of Awareness of Surround" was presented as using terms like "unreal," while the characteristic "Unreality"—relabeled "Unreality/Disorientation" in this study—did not).

Numerous aspects of the orgasm experience were unexamined in this study, which relied on a largely young sample of undergraduates in Psychology classes. These students likely had limited sexual and relationship histories, at least in relation to sex with a partner. The surprisingly limited use of Emotional Intimacy and Emotional Fusion to describe the orgasm experience during sexual intercourse may have arisen from most

participants' inexperience. Although you can have sexual intercourse with someone you simply know and with someone you also love, you can only "make love" with the latter. The relationship status of the relatively young participants who engaged in sexual intercourse to achieve their orgasm may have curtailed more fulsome romantic descriptions.

Like other studies on orgasm experience, the data rely on retrospective memory, which may carry distortions and be influenced by demand characteristics and other forms of bias. Although participants were asked to recall their most recent orgasm in hopes of avoiding some distortions, this did not necessarily mean that the orgasm was a recent one. For example, one participant described her most recent orgasm—from 17 years earlier. Allowing participants to describe their orgasms as they chose, without constraints, was an attempt to minimize demand characteristics, but clearly participants were not uniform in what they took the task to be. It would be interesting and useful in future research to examine participants from diverse walks of life and different age groups to see if the historical period in which one first learned about sexuality and orgasm influences the characteristics that participants recall, as seems to be true in other areas of sexuality (Gottschalk, 2003). Overall, amidst these limitations, the findings of this study indicate few sex and sexual context differences in participants' descriptions of orgasm.

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APPENDIX:

The Coding Scheme for Orgasm Descriptions.

The coding scheme for orgasm descriptions (with initial reliability scores).§

SENSORY COMPONENTS	Initial Reliability
Buildup of Tension:	97.7%
Building	
Rising	
Swelling	
pressure/feeling grows/gets stronger	
tension/tense up	
Release of Tension:	94.7%
Relieving	
Releasing	
Erupting	
exploding/explosion/like a volcano	
like my head would blow off	
fireworks gone off inside me	

SENSORY COMPONENTS (continued)	Initial Reliability
Spreading Sensations:	96.7%
Flowing/overflowing	
Spreading	
Radiating	
rush of energy/blood/endorphins/cold chills	
progressing the feeling further	
sparks of electricity going through me	
good feeling went from x to y	
waves of heat/relaxation	
automatically sends happiness and tingles your entire body	
hot water starting from my crotch and going toward my knees	
sensation runs through entire body	
electric shock surged through my body	
almost paralyzing feeling sweeping over my entire body	
started at toes and moved its way upward	

SENSORY COMPONENTS (continued)	Initial Reliability
Whole-Body Involvement:	90.0%
Trembling	
Shuddering	
whole/entire/full body experience	
[tingling/shaking] all over	
shaking/body shakes	
every part of my body felt great	
feeling moves from head to toes/feet	
feeling comes over my body	
my body [tingled]	
muscles tighten everywhere	
throughout my body (but not “through my body”)	
Ejaculatory Sensations:	99.0%
Shooting	
Oozing	

SENSORY COMPONENTS (continued)	Initial Reliability
Ejaculatory Sensations (continued):	
Spurting	
squirting	
bullet of euphoria ejaculating out of my penis	
(simply mentioning ejaculation was not counted)	
Rhythmic Sensations:	95.0%
Pulsating	
Throbbing	
Quivering	
heart pounding/racing/quickening/rate increasing	
waves (plural only)	
spasm(s)/spasming	
trembling	
vibrating	

SENSORY COMPONENTS (continued)	Initial Reliability
Miscellaneous Sensations:	94.0%
Tingling	
Tickling (always combined with “tingling”)	
Flushing	
feeling numb	
goose bumps	
sensitive	
like a weight lifted	
Thermal Sensations:	98.0%
Cool	
chills	
shivering	
Warm	
Hot	
nerves on fire	

EVALUATIVE COMPONENTS	Initial Reliability
Feeling of Inevitability:	94.3%
Inevitable	
out of control/uncontrollable	
hit the right spot/G-spot	
letting go/letting it happen	
Intensity:	92.0%
Mild	
Moderate	
Intense	
Powerful	
invigorating	
strong	
burst/rush/release of energy/energizing	
explosion/exploding	

EVALUATIVE COMPONENTS (continued)	Initial Reliability
Temporal Evaluation:	92.3%
Quick	
Long	
Unending	
short	
[exact number of]/ a few seconds	
Physical Effects:	93.7%
Relaxing	
Exhausting	
Engulfing	
relieved	
tiring/tired	
breathtaking/breathless/hard to/out of breathe	
energy drained/felt weak/week	
body asleep	

EVALUATIVE COMPONENTS (continued)	Initial Reliability
Depth:	96.7%
Deep	
Full	
Complete	
Global Pleasure:	85.0%
Pleasant	
Enjoyable	
*Pleasurable/*sending good sensations	
Incredible/euphoric/ecstasy earth shattering/mind blowing/glorious	
a high/nirvana/died and gone to heaven	
happiness/fun/my body was happy/endorphin rush	
Sensual Pleasure:	94.3%
Soothing/comforting	
Sensual/ sending good sensations	
Sweet	

EVALUATIVE COMPONENTS (continued)	Initial Reliability
Sexual pleasure (continued):	
Exquisite	
burst of/focus on good sensations	
sensational	
Satisfaction:	87.7%
Satisfying	
Fulfilling	
Gratifying	
Cathartic/weight lifted/worries gone	
awesome	
amazing	
wonderful/fantastic	
[felt] good/great	
magical	
best feeling ever	

EVALUATIVE COMPONENTS (continued)	Initial Reliability
Satisfaction (continued):	
felt excellent	
sensational	
perfect	
beyond pleasurable	
self-indulgent	
Excitement:	97.3%
Exhilarating	
Exciting	
Wild	
arousing	
over stimulating	
flustered	
heart rate increased	
feeling butterflies	

AFFECTIVE COMPONENTS	Initial Reliability
Emotional Intimacy:	98.7%
Close	
Loving/made love	
connected	
Joy-Peacefulness:	99.0%
Peaceful/calm	
Blissful	
Tender	
Joy-Elation:	97.3%
Ecstatic	
Euphoric	
Passionate	
Elated	
Rapturous	
complete happiness/extremely happy	

AFFECTIVE COMPONENTS (continued)	Initial Reliability
Emotional Excitation:	93.0%
Uncontrolled/out of control	
Abandoned	
could not handle the tension/could not think to breathe	
Emotional Fusion:	98.7%
Immersing	
Merging	
Unifying	
collapsed into partner	
thoughts only about partner	
emotionally connected with partner	
Unreality/Disorientation:	96.7%
Light-headed/felt like I'm was going to pass out	
Dizzy	
disorientation/jumbled sentences/feel halfway stupid in the middle	

AFFECTIVE COMPONENTS (continued)	Initial Reliability
Unreality/Disorientation (continued):	
intoxicating	
speechless/mindless	
felt like I was in an aurora	
weird	
Lack of Awareness of Surround:	95.0%
*Detached/*separated from myself	
out of body experience/outer body experience	
Oblivious	
Unreal	
letting go of the world/grip on what was going on around me faded	
felt like I was in an aurora	
concentrating on orgasm/orgasm all I can think about**/**devoted to orgasm only	
forget everything around me/could not focus on anything else	
not a care/release from worry	

AFFECTIVE COMPONENTS (continued)	Initial Reliability
Suspension:	100%
Soaring	
Suspended/floating	
Miscellaneous:	(100%: no instances)
Melting	
Vulnerable	

§ Subtypes of each component that begin with a capital letter are taken directly from Mah and Binik, 2001; those not present in the current corpus are italicized. Elaborations from the current corpus are listed in lower case.