

Men's and Women's Reactions to Sexually Explicit Films: A Serendipitous Finding

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We proposed that men and women would be "turned off" by watching men and women like themselves engaged in sexual activity and "turned on" by watching someone of the opposite sex engaged in the same activity. We tested this hypothesis by showing college men and women eight films: films depicting male and female homosexuality, male and female masturbation, and males and females engaged in heterosexual intercourse. We assessed men and women's reactions via the Byrne-Sheffield (1965) Feeling Scale and Griffitt's (1975) Physiological Arousal Scale. We found support for our hypothesis. We also attempted to determine whether men and women differed in how easily they became aroused by sexually explicit films. We found that they did not.

KEY WORDS: homosexuality; masturbation; heterosexual intercourse; Byrne-Sheffield Feeling Scale; Griffitt's Physiological Arousal Scale.

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 1976, in an introductory human sexuality class, we were showing two sexually explicit films. The lights went out and "Soma Touch" (a film depicting male masturbation) began. A scattering of men slipped out. The lights went on, and the class discussed the film. The lights went out and "Susan" (a film depicting female masturbation) began. About halfway into the film, a column of young women began to leave the auditorium. The lights went on . . . and the class began to discuss that film. "Why did so many of the students leave?"

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STUDY 1: PROCEDURE

In the summer of 1976, we had asked 58 summer school students to preview "Soma Touch" (on a Tuesday) and "Susan" (on a Thursday) and to say what they thought of the films. Students expressed their evaluations on three scales: the Byrne-Sheffield (1965) Feeling Scale, Griffitt's (1975) Physiological Arousal Scale, and a description of postfilm sexual behavior.

The Byrne-Sheffield (1965) Feeling Scale³

Byrne *et al.* (1974) argue that erotica generally stimulates some sort of emotional reaction in all of us. How we interpret that reaction varies. Some men and women describe their reaction to explicit films in extremely positive terms (on the Byrne-Sheffield Feeling Scale, they describe themselves as "excited," "entertained," "sexually aroused," "curious," and "not bored").⁴ Other men and women describe their reactions to explicit films in extremely negative terms (they describe themselves as "disgusted," "nauseated," "angry," and "depressed").

Men's and women's overall reaction to the films consists of their positive reactions minus their negative reactions.

Griffitt's (1975) Physiological Arousal Scale⁵

Griffitt's scales are designed to assess how sexually aroused men and women feel during erotic films. First, they are asked to indicate their specific physiological reactions to the film [possible reactions range from males (0) = "no erection," females (0) = "no genital sensations at all," to males (6) = "ejaculation," females (6) = "orgasm"]. They are also asked: "Overall, to what extent were you physically excited or physically aroused during the movie?" [possible answers range from (1) = "not at all physically excited" to (5) "very physically excited"]. Respondent's scores on these two items are summed to form an index of physiological arousal.

³Byrne *et al.* (1974) and Griffitt *et al.* (1974) have also used these scales in subsequent research.

⁴Originally, Byrne and Sheffield's (1965) positive factor included six terms: "excited," "entertained," "sexually aroused," "curious," "not bored," and "anxious." In recent research, the positive factor has consisted of only the first five terms.

⁵Adapted from Schmidt and Sigusch (1970).

Postfilm Sexual Behavior

Two days after "Soma Touch" and "Susan" were shown, we asked students to report their sexual activities in the 2 days since viewing the movies. Possible answers ranged from (1) = "necking, kissing, and hugging" to (8) = "having intercourse" through (10) = "performing cunnilingus or fellatio."

STUDY 1: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hypothesis I: Men and women will be most sexually aroused by seeing a person of the opposite sex masturbating; they will be least aroused by seeing someone of the same sex engaged in such activities.

When we examine our data, it is clear that Hypothesis I is strongly confirmed. Both men and women were sexually aroused by watching the sexual activity of the opposite sex; both were somewhat repulsed by watching the sexual activity of their own sex (see Table I and Fig. 1).

For example, on the Byrne-Sheffield (1965) Feeling Scale, men responded most positively to "Susan" (the female masturbation film) and most negatively to "Soma Touch" (the male masturbation film). The women responded in the opposite way. When we examine men's and women's overall reactions to the two

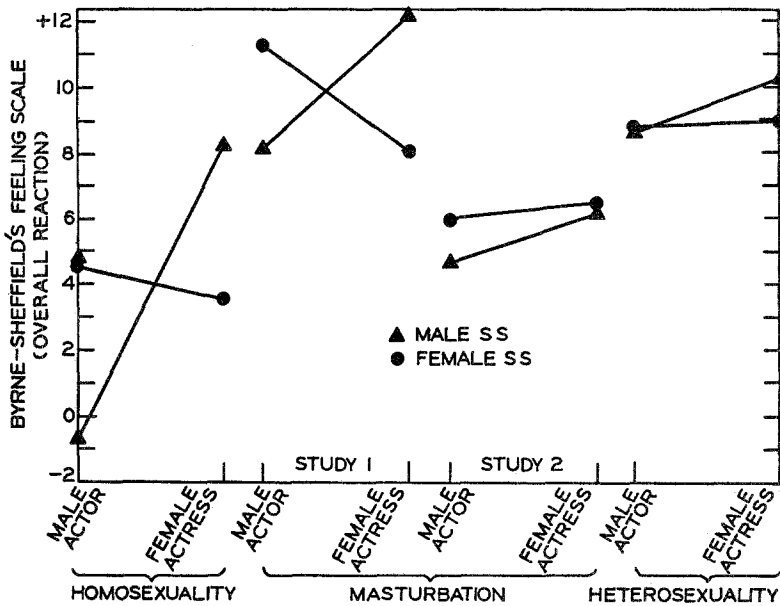


Fig. 1. Men's and women's reactions to male and female sexuality.

Table 1. Reactions to Male/Female Masturbation

| Subject's sex | Actor's sex | Topic of film (N) | The Byrne-Sheffield (1965) Feeling Scale | | | Griffitt's (1975) physiological arousal scale ^a | Postfilm sexual behavior ^a |
|---------------|-------------|---|--|---------------------------------|------------------|--|---------------------------------------|
| | | | Positive reactions ^a | Negative reactions ^b | Overall reaction | | |
| Male | Male | Masturbation (30) | 13.00 | 4.83 | 8.17 | 2.00 | 0.60 |
| | Female | | 16.87 | 4.47 | 12.40 | 3.87 | 0.90 |
| Female | | Difference in ratings | -3.87 | +0.37 | -4.23 | -1.87 | -0.30 |
| | Male | Masturbation (28) | 15.71 | 4.36 | 11.35 | 3.75 | 0.68 |
| | Female | | 13.07 | 5.00 | 8.07 | 2.82 | 0.86 |
| | | Difference in ratings (SD) ^c | +2.64 (4.31) | -0.64 (1.28) | +3.29 (4.83) | +0.93 (2.03) | -0.18 (1.30) |

^aThe higher the number, the more positive the subject's reaction to the film.

^bThe higher the number, the more negative the subject's reaction to the film.

^cPooled within-cell (sex of subject) standard deviations.

films, we find that their reactions were significantly different (i.e., the men's $\bar{M}_{\text{Diff}} = -4.23$; women's $\bar{M}_{\text{Diff}} = 3.29$; $F_{\text{Diff}} = 33.85$, $df = 1, 54$, $p < 0.001$).

When we examine Griffitt's (1975) Physiological Arousal Scale, the results are the same. Men and women were most aroused when observing the opposite sex engaged in sexual activity (i.e., men's $\bar{M}_{\text{Diff}} = -1.87$; women's $\bar{M}_{\text{Diff}} = +0.93$; $F = 28.42$, $df = 1, 54$, $p < 0.001$).

Men's and women's postfilm sexual behavior, however, was not differentially influenced by their viewing.

Schmidt (1975) secured results similar to our own: he studied reactions of men and women at the University of Hamburg to black-and-white slides and films of male and female masturbation. He found that college men were far more favorable toward pictures of female than male masturbation. College women, on the other hand, were slightly more favorable toward the male masturbation pictures than the female pictures.

Why are men and women "turned off" by watching men and women like themselves engaged in sexual activity and "turned on" by watching someone of the opposite sex engaged in exactly the same activity?

Two possible reasons for the phenomenon seem reasonable:

1. Perhaps men and women identify with the actor on the screen masturbating, especially if he or she is similar to themselves. Even today, a majority of college students still believe that masturbation is sinful, shameful, disgusting, and potentially harmful (see Abramson and Mosher, 1975). Thus men and women may feel most uneasy about observing someone like themselves engage in a taboo activity.

2. Perhaps men and women, in fantasy, imagine that they are sexually involved with the person masturbating. When a man or woman watches someone of the same sex masturbating, he/she may imagine participating in homosexual activity; when he/she watches someone of the opposite sex masturbating, he/she may imagine participating in heterosexual activity. Since homosexuality is still not socially condoned, homosexual fantasies are likely to be more upsetting than heterosexual fantasies.

The data from Study 1 seem clear. Men and women are moderately "turned on" by observing someone of the opposite sex masturbate; they are moderately "turned off" by watching someone of the same sex engaged in the same activity. What about other sexual activities? Would men and women have similar reactions if they were asked to watch men and women engaged in homosexual or heterosexual intercourse?

STUDY 2: PROCEDURE

Subjects were 556 men and women enrolled in an introductory human sexuality class. We explained to the students that we were interested in how they

felt about six sexually explicit films we would be showing during the next 2 weeks. The films were "Vir Amat," which depicted male homosexuality, and "Holding," which depicted female homosexuality; "Auto-American Dreams," which depicted male masturbation, and "Shirley," which depicted female masturbation; "Rich and Judy," which depicted adolescent heterosexuality, and "A Ripple in Time," which depicted elderly heterosexuality. On the day a film — or pair of films — was to be shown to a class, we handed out 80 white and 80 blue questionnaires to a random selection of the class.

If the movies depicted homosexuality or masturbation, we asked the men and women who received the white questionnaire to evaluate the female homosexuality or female masturbation movie ("Holding" and "Shirley"). Half the time, we showed "Vir Amat" before "Holding"; half the time we did the opposite. Half the time we showed "The Auto-American Dream" before we showed "Shirley"; half the time we did the opposite.

If the film showed an adolescent or elderly couple engaged in heterosexual intercourse, we asked the men and women receiving the white questionnaire to pay special attention to the actor; we asked men and women receiving the blue questionnaire to pay special attention to the actress. (We explained that we were trying to make sure that someone was previewing part of every film.) Students were told that they could make any other comments on the movie they wished.

The "reviewers" began by recording the following: (1) the student's own sex, (2) the actor's sex, and (3) the title of the film that he/she was reviewing. The films were then shown. The reviewers indicated their reaction via two scales⁶: the Byrne-Sheffield (1965) Feeling Scale and Griffitt's (1975) Physiological Arousal Scale.

STUDY 2: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Hypothesis II: Men and women will be most sexually aroused by seeing a person of the opposite sex masturbating, engaged in homosexual activity, or engaged in heterosexual activity; they will be less aroused by seeing someone of the same sex engaged in such activities.

The data support Hypothesis II⁷ (see Table II and Figs. 1 and 2). The subject's sex does interact with the actor's sex in determining how students react to

⁶ We asked students to take alternate seats while filling out their questionnaires, so that they could have some privacy.

⁷ There are two ways we could have run this study: (1) We could have prepared experimental films. We would have been very careful to develop films (or pairs of films) that, overall, men and women responded to equally, and to make sure that in every film, overall, the male actors and female actresses were equally appealing. This would tend to produce small sex of actor and film main effects. We chose not to do this. (2) Instead, we decided to study students' reactions to commercially made films. This means that, overall, men

Table II. Reactions to Male/Female Sexuality

| Subject's sex | Actor's sex | Film | The Byrne-Sheffield (1965) Feeling Scale | | | Griffitt's (1975) physiological arousal scale ^a | |
|---------------|---------------------|-----------------|--|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|-------------------------------|
| | | | (N) | Positive reactions ^a | Negative reactions ^b | | Overall reaction ^a |
| Male | Male | Homosexuality | (41) | 8.71 | 9.39 | -0.68 | 1.54 |
| | | Masturbation | (42) | 9.83 | 5.02 | 4.81 | 1.71 |
| | | Heterosexuality | (57) | 13.60 | 4.84 | 8.75 | 3.54 |
| Male | Female | Homosexuality | (35) | 13.80 | 5.54 | 8.26 | 4.00 |
| | | Masturbation | (33) | 12.06 | 5.73 | 6.33 | 3.27 |
| | | Heterosexuality | (74) | 14.93 | 4.64 | 10.30 | 3.73 |
| Female | Male | Homosexuality | (33) | 11.55 | 6.91 | 4.64 | 2.12 |
| | | Masturbation | (31) | 11.32 | 5.29 | 6.03 | 2.10 |
| | | Heterosexuality | (73) | 13.59 | 4.75 | 8.84 | 3.30 |
| Female | Female | Homosexuality | (31) | 10.48 | 6.87 | 3.61 | 2.39 |
| | | Masturbation | (43) | 12.19 | 5.60 | 6.58 | 2.98 |
| | | Heterosexuality | (63) | 13.84 | 4.81 | 9.03 | 3.63 |
| | (SD) ^c | | | (3.87) | (2.10) | (4.75) | (2.14) |
| | Source of variation | df | | | | | |
| | A (subject's sex) | 1 | 0.02 | 1.00 | 0.32 | 1.05 | |
| | B (actor's sex) | 1 | 20.98 | 9.02 | 24.70 | 26.02 | |
| | C (Film) | 2 | 39.09 | 64.05 | 65.12 | 17.13 | |
| | AB | 1 | 18.16 | 10.72 | 25.38 | 5.67 | |
| | C | 2 | 3.66 | 9.11 | 8.04 | 2.21 | |
| | S (ABC) | 544 | | | | | |

^aThe higher the number, the more positive the subject's reaction to the film.

^bThe higher the number, the more negative the subject's reaction to the film.

^cPooled within-cell standard deviations.

the films (see the *AB* interaction). As one can see from Table II, on the Byrne-Sheffield (1965) Feeling Scale men and women reacted relatively more positively and relatively less negatively when viewing the opposite sex than when viewing the same sex engaged in sexual activity (F 's for the *AB* interactions = 18.16, and 10.72, $df = 1, 544, p < 0.0001$) respectively. When we examine men's and women's overall reactions (i.e., subjects' positive reactions minus their negative reactions) to the two films, we find that their reactions were significantly different ($F = 25.38, df = 1, 544, p < 0.0001$).

When we examine Griffitt's (1975) Physiological Arousal Scale, we secure the same result. Men and women were relatively more physiologically aroused when viewing members of the opposite sex than when viewing members of the same sex engaged in sexual activity ($F = 5.67, df = 1, 544, p < 0.02$).

or women might be more turned on by the films we have chosen. It also means that, overall, or for any set of films, the male actor might be much sexier than the female actress or *vice versa*. For example, if a male actor was old, physically unattractive, and clumsy, while his female partner was young, beautiful, and lithe, we might find that both men and women felt he was less sexy. (We see that this was, in fact, the case in two instances.) Thus, although we are able to predict that subject's sex and actor's sex should interact in determining reactions, we cannot say what form that interaction should take — except to predict that, in Figs. 1 and 2, the men's slopes should be more positive than the women's.

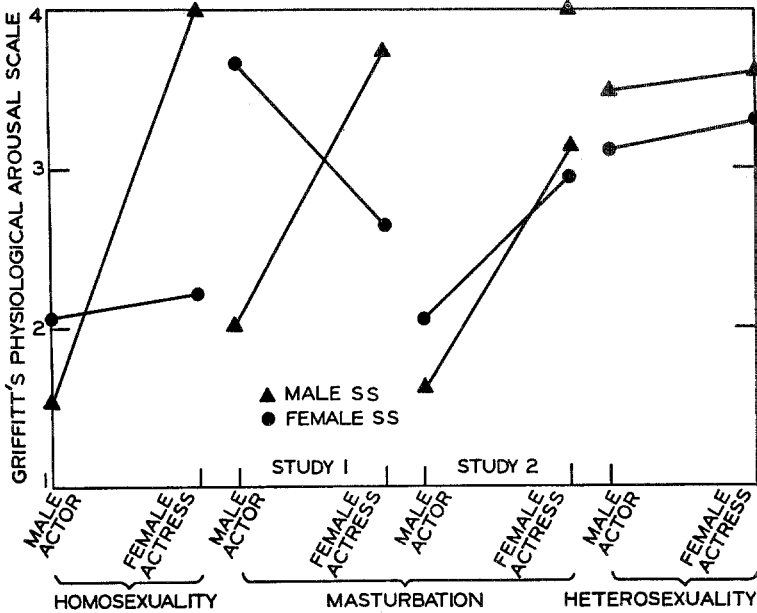


Fig. 2. Men's and women's reactions to male and female sexuality.

The data, then, provide strong support for Hypothesis II. Next consider men's and women's relations to each of the films:

The Homosexuality Films

From Figs. 1 and 2, it is clear that it is the homosexuality movie that arouses the most divergent reactions in men and women. Men found female homosexuality extremely arousing; they found male homosexuality extremely unarousing. The women had a comparable reaction,⁸ but it was far less intense; women found male homosexuality only slightly more arousing than female homosexuality.

The Masturbation Films

In Study 1 (where the movies were "Soma Touch" and "Susan"), men's and women's reactions to the masturbation movies were mirror images. Men preferred movies of female masturbation; women preferred movies of male

⁸They, too, preferred the opposite-sex to the same-sex movies.

masturbation. In Study 2 (where the movies were "The Auto-American Dream" and "Shirley", everyone agreed that "The Auto-American Dream" was less arousing than "Shirley."⁹ The male/female difference still held, however: Men found "Shirley" far more arousing than "The Auto-American Dream." Women found "Shirley" only slightly more arousing than "The Auto-American Dream."

The Heterosexuality Films

We secured similar results for "Rich and Judy" and "A Ripple in Time." Everyone – male and female – found the female actresses to be "sexier" than the male actors.¹⁰ As before, the male/female difference still held, however. Men found the female actresses to be far more arousing than the male; the women found them to be only slightly more arousing than their male counterparts.

AN ADDITIONAL QUESTION

Question: Do men and women differ in how easily they become aroused by sexually explicit films?

Early researchers took it for granted that men and women would differ markedly in how aroused they were by reading or viewing sexually explicit material. Early survey studies supported their assumption. They found that men and women differed markedly in whether they had seen explicit material and whether they had been aroused by it. Kinsey *et al.* (1953) suggested that it is "likely that most females are indifferent to the existence of such material because it means nothing to them emotionally" (p. 662).

In part, not much has changed since Kinsey's time. Males still report much more exposure to, interest in, and reaction to erotic books, pictures, and movies than do females (Abelson *et al.*, 1971; Nawy, 1971; Izard and Caplan, 1974).

In part, however, a great deal has changed. By 1977 Baron and Byrne were observing: "It has repeatedly been found that males and females are remarkably similar in responding with sexual excitement to erotic stimuli" (p. 485). Studies by Schmidt and Sigusch (1970), Schmidt *et al.* (1973), Schmidt (1975), Herrell (1975), and Miller *et al.* (1976) provide support for Baron and Byrne's contention that men and women find explicit sex equally arousing. Our results, too, support Baron and Byrne's (1977) conclusion: overall, men and women found our films equally arousing (or nonarousing).

⁹This is not too surprising. "Shirley" is in color, runs for 16 min, and is a very popular masturbation film. "The Auto-American Dream" is in black and white, runs only 5 min, and is rarely shown.

¹⁰Both "Rich" and "Judy" are physically attractive. However, in "A Ripple in Time," the male is 63 years old and showing signs of age. The female is 50 years old and quite attractive.

When we examine the effect of the subject's sex (main effect A) on reactivity, we see that on the Byrne-Sheffield (1965) Feeling Scale males and females are equally positive and equally negative about the films (F 's = 0.02 and 1.00, $df = 1, 544$, n.s., respectively). Their scores on the overall reaction are virtually identical ($F = 0.32$, $df = 1, 544$, n.s.). Men's and women's scores on Griffitt's (1975) Physiological Arousal Scale are also virtually identical ($F = 1.05$, $df = 1, 544$, n.s.).

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