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# Social Representations of Female Orgasm

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## Abstract

This study examines women's social representations of female orgasm. Fifty semi-structured interviews were conducted with British women. The data were thematically analysed and compared with the content of female orgasm-related writing in two women's magazines over a 30-year period. The results indicate that orgasm is deemed the goal of sex with emphasis on its physiological dimension. However, the women and the magazines graft onto this scientifically driven representation the importance of relational and emotive aspects of orgasm. For the women, particularly those who experience themselves as having problems with orgasm, the scientifically driven representations induce feelings of failure, but are also resisted. The findings highlight the role played by the social context in women's subjective experience of their sexual health.

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## Keywords

- *female orgasm*
- *magazine portrayal*
- *social representations*

## Introduction

THIS STUDY explores women's subjective thoughts and feelings regarding female orgasm and, in particular, problems with having orgasms. The resonance between scientific, media and women's representations of female orgasm is examined to contextualize this subjectivity. This advances understanding of key forces that shape and are shaped by women's social representations.

The diagnosis of sexual problems as a distinct psychiatric classification first appeared in 1980 in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). This included four categories, one of which was 'orgasmic disorder'. The conceptualization of 'orgasmic disorder' within an individualist, bio-medical framework has been questioned by a number of researchers who have called for understanding the social aspects that shape women's in/experience of orgasm (Lavie-Ajayi, 2005; Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Potts, 2000; Tiefer, 1995).

The social representations framework allows systematic study of forces that shape women's conceptualization of a social object such as orgasm. A social representation is shared, though not necessarily consensually, by members of a social group (Wagner & Hayes, 2005). The framework concerns itself with how a shared 'common sense' evolves, what form it takes, and the consequences it has. People's social representations develop not so much by intrapsychic reasoning as by a process of communicating (Moscovici, 1984). This includes communication of ideas that arise in the universe of the sciences to publics. Scientific expertise holds particularly high status in late modern societies (Moscovici, 2008) and subjective understandings and feelings are constructed, in large part, by the mass media transforming scientific thinking for their audiences (see Bauer & Gaskell, 1999). The mass media do not impose ideas on publics. Rather, the individual and society are deemed to be in a dialectical relationship; the individual's thoughts and actions are a product of prevailing conventions, norms and values and individuals can effect changes in such entities (Augoustinos, Walker, & Donaghue, 2006; Joffe & Staerklé, 2007). Individuals bring ideas passed down through the generations to their readings of media material. A shared 'common sense' is steered by memory and traditional structures (Moscovici, 1984) rather than by contemporary

messages alone. The social representational perspective, which has not been used previously in relation to women's sexual health, can enhance understanding of the social construction of sexual health 'problems'.

## Science's perspective on female orgasm

Scientific thinking about female orgasm has changed over time. Prior to the 18th century female sexual pleasure was an unquestioned commonplace and linked to procreation (Laqueur, 1986). During the Victorian era female orgasm was portrayed as unhealthy (Maines, 1999) and linked to disease (Tannahill, 1989). Treatments were devised to solve 'the problem of orgasm in women' (Wakefield, 1988). This medical framing arose in a moralistic climate in which respectable women were not supposed to enjoy sex (Archer & Lloyd, 1982).

The beginning of the 20th century saw a shift in the scientific understanding of female orgasm. Most prominently, Freud (1905) argued that clitoral orgasm was an adolescent phenomenon and that after puberty mature women switch to having vaginal orgasms. While the sexology of the day thus legitimized female orgasm, anything other than vaginal orgasm was associated with the psychological disorder 'frigidity' (Koedt, 1973).

Following the Second World War Kinsey Pomeroy, Martin and Gebhard's (1953) and Masters and Johnson's (1966, 1970) research played a key role (Garnets & Peplau, 2000; Heath, 1982) in further modifying the medical perspective (Davidson & Darling, 1989). Both argued for the similarity between female and male sexuality by emphasizing its physiological aspects. Kinsey et al. (1953) used orgasm as an index of sexual achievement and enjoyment. Masters and Johnson (1966) described orgasm as the peak of the human sexual response cycle. In contrast to previous ideas, there was a shift from the vagina to the clitoris as the supposed source of orgasm.

Contemporary studies corroborate the notion that the clitoris is the primary source of sensory input for triggering orgasm and argue that clitoral and vaginal orgasm are biologically indistinguishable (Mah & Binik, 2001). However, the focus of contemporary female orgasm research—funded heavily by the pharmaceutical industry—is on biochemical solutions to 'problems with orgasm', (Moynihan, 2003).

## Media perspective on female orgasm

No systematic research has previously investigated the portrayal of female orgasm in the mass media. However, women's magazines have been found to play an important role in shaping women's perceptions of womanhood and femininity (Ferguson, 1983; McRobbie, 1991; Winship, 1987) and in constructing a collective female subjectivity (Ballaster, Beetham, Frazes, & Hebron, 1991).

Influenced by the 'sexual revolution', editors of British weeklies started experimenting with a range of sexual topics, which had previously been taboo, in the 1960s. A trend towards greater sexual explicitness became evident (McRobbie, 1991). *Cosmopolitan*, considered radical at its launch in 1972, was the flagship of this shift (Machin & Thornborrow, 2003; Nelson & Paek, 2005). It saw sexual pleasure as a 'woman's right' and a means of discovering oneself. It encouraged women to be more sexually assertive, while cautioning against aggression, which was represented as a potential contributor to male impotence. *Cosmopolitan* positioned women as responsible for both parties' sexuality and established a tension between the importance of self-responsibility and pleasure on the one hand and (heterosexual) relationships on the other (Ballaster et al., 1991; Winship, 1987). Sex was portrayed as the nucleus of the relationship but as always potentially problematic. It became an arena in which self-help and self-determination were necessary as women were encouraged to work both on their internal musculature and on their relationships (Winship, 1987).

Over the years the volume of sexual content in women's and teenager's magazines has increased, with intercourse presented as a fun-filled, casual and risk-free activity (Kim & Ward, 2004). In spite of the emphasis on women taking control in sex, some have argued that *Cosmopolitan*, like *Playboy*, portrays the main goal of sex as pleasing men (Krassas, Blauwkamp, & Wesselink, 2001). Magazines still implore women to subordinate their own interests for preservation of their relationships, and to please men via enhancing beauty and sexual availability (Garner, Sterk, & Adams, 1998; Kim & Ward, 2004).

## Women's perspective on female orgasm

Set against the scientific and media writings, what is women's perspective on female orgasm? Most

studies explore the relationship between frequent experience of orgasm and women feeling that their sexual life is satisfying, yet results are inconclusive (Clifford, 1978; Fisher, 1973; Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, & Skolata, 1994; Waterman & Chiauuzi, 1982). More conclusively, women feel that their orgasms are important to men (Lavie & Willig, 2005; Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Roberts, Kippax, Waldby, & Crawford, 1995) and often construct female orgasm as a gift men give to women in exchange for women offering their passive bodies (Gilfoyle, Wilson, & Brown, 1992).

In addition, women represent orgasm as the ultimate goal of sex (Potts, 2000), a romantic and sexual highpoint, a symbol of womanhood (Lavie & Willig, 2005) and of normality (Nicolson & Burr, 2003). Thus, the inability to have orgasms is seen as a flaw and instantiation of inferiority (Lavie & Willig, 2005; Nicolson & Burr, 2003).

Thus far, there has been no empirical exploration of the social context in which these representations are built. In particular, no studies examine the specific interplay of the mass media and women's shared 'common sense' regarding female orgasm. The study reported here develops understanding of how the messages from science impact upon the media and women's representations and the consequences of this for women's problems with orgasm.

## Method

Two methods are used. Thematic analysis of in-depth interviews regarding female orgasm is accompanied by content analysis of women's magazines. The magazines were chosen on the basis that the vast majority of the women interviewed referred to the media as a key source of their initial thinking about female orgasm, with *Cosmopolitan*, in particular, being the most frequently mentioned.

## Interviews and analysis

In-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 50 women purposively sampled to include women with and without problems with orgasm across the generations. The study design included younger, middle-aged and older women (25 to 32 years olds ( $n = 20$ ), 48 to 55 years olds ( $n = 20$ ) and 60 to 67 years olds ( $n = 10$ )), with each age-band including equal numbers of women who described themselves as 'having problems with orgasm' and those who did not. The majority of the interviewees were white, heterosexual, qualified to

academic degree or professional equivalent level and had a partner at the time of the interview. Most interviewees were recruited through advertisements placed in national and local British newspapers and London-based clinics, hospitals, universities and sports centres. The advertisements sought volunteers for a research project concerning relationships and sexuality. Once contact had been made, the researcher asked questions on the telephone to fill the three age categories.<sup>1</sup>

Interviews lasted approximately one hour and were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. They began by asking general questions about sex and about how the participant gained their initial and ongoing knowledge about sex and orgasm. They then elicited talk about past and present in/experience of orgasm. Following the interview participants completed a short questionnaire ascertaining demographic details. It asked whether they defined themselves as having problems with orgasm or not.<sup>2</sup> Interviewees were assured of confidentiality.

A coding framework was devised to identify the key themes that characterized the women's interviews and guide the thematic analysis of the textual corpus. It was inductive and developed on the basis of reading all of the transcripts. To increase the consistency and transparency of the process an independent coder coded 10 percent of the interviews. In the small number of cases where coding did not tally the codes were more carefully operationalized.

### Media analysis

As stated, the interviews revealed that women's magazines were the key media source for women's initial and ongoing knowledge about female orgasm. British *Cosmopolitan* was relevant for all age groups and *Woman's Weekly* for the oldest women.

Thirty years of British *Cosmopolitan* were analysed, starting with its first issue in 1972. The sample consisted of 60 issues, two per year, chosen at random over the 30-year period. The analysis of *Woman's Weekly* began with publications from 1970 to ensure comparability with the *Cosmopolitan* sample. Having read a sample of *Woman's Weekly* it became evident that the issue of orgasm only appeared in its problems pages, and even then, very rarely. Therefore, the analysis focused solely on the problems pages covering all references to female orgasm over the 40-year period. In common with the method used for *Cosmopolitan*, all references to female orgasm were analysed.

The coding frame designed for the interviews was used as a starting point for coding the media. However, the frame was modified to fit the media data, which necessitated the deletion, addition and modification of a number of codes.

## Findings

The social representation of female orgasm is constituted by three major (intersecting) themes. They are reported separately, from the media's and then the women's perspective.

### *Theme: Orgasm as central indicator of sexual pleasure and goal of sex*

*Media perspective* In *Cosmopolitan* and *Woman's Weekly* female orgasm is frequently construed as an indicator of women's sexual pleasure. Women are encouraged to be assertive about their sexual enjoyment and to take responsibility for it:

Because our orgasm involves so much more than simply rubbing this or poking that. Sexual ecstasy for women is circular, lyrical and spherical. It's an expression of mind, body, heart, soul and spirit. It is a celebration of self ... women demanding pleasure instead of faking it. Women masturbating to orgasm. Women taking charge of their sexuality. (*Cosmopolitan*, 1997)

This extract provides a key gauge of the way orgasm is represented in women's magazines. Sexual ecstasy is regarded as synonymous with orgasm. Women are encouraged to achieve orgasm because it demonstrates, simultaneously, their pleasure and their liberation. As such orgasm becomes the goal of sex. The way to achieve it—by demanding it of men or by masturbation—is of secondary importance. Also noteworthy is the differentiation between male and female orgasm. While the male version is depicted as mechanical—'rubbing this, poking that'—female orgasm is depicted in more poetic, glorified terms.

The orgasm as goal-of-sex representation is symbolized by the goal-orientated metaphors that the magazines use to discuss orgasm:

Rid yourself of the idea sex is a marathon and realise in just 10 minutes you could both have had a fantastic orgasm. (*Cosmopolitan*, 1999)

... he can wait longer to give you the chance to reach a finale before or with him ... (*Woman's Weekly*, 1998)

Such extracts represent sex as a race and orgasm as its final line. These metaphors transfer the notion of exhilaration from the race to orgasm. However, the magazines also discuss cases in which the goal-orientated imperative diminishes enjoyment and harms chances of reaching orgasm, partners' sense of manhood and relationships.

Furthermore, the magazines criticize women who are 'orgasm-obsessed', recognizing but not reflecting fully on their own role in promoting this:

A true nymphomaniac is a woman who is incapable of complete sexual pleasure, and seeks desperately for the elusive orgasm in the bed of one man after another. (*Cosmopolitan*, 1974)

I don't even know whether I would say that orgasm is the aim or not. Certainly, it has become the published aim, but I think to make orgasm the aim of sex is another performance nuisance. (*Cosmopolitan*, 1983)

### *Women's perspective*

If I was having sex and not having an orgasm then I would get very frustrated, I expect. But the two in my mind have always been linked. Therefore, if I started to have sex and not orgasm then I would feel deprived. I've never had sex just for the sake of it because there's not a lot of point. (Tamara, 52, NP)<sup>3</sup>

Orgasm is represented as the goal, end point and *raison d'être* of sex by the vast majority of the women. However, only a few report that they always experience orgasm when having sex. Most—including many who construe themselves as not having problems with orgasm—do not experience orgasm in each sexual encounter.

Those who see themselves as having problems with orgasm treat the 'orgasm as the goal of sex' representation highly critically. They feel that the media and male partners put undue pressure on them:

'I sometimes think, when I listen to things on the radio or women's magazines, that there is a feeling of having to achieve an orgasm. It is a performance and you have got to do well' (Renee, 65, P).

In women's attempt to diminish the pressure that the representation exerts, they challenge the ubiquity of its importance:

Well it is the ultimate thing but it doesn't have to be all the time. It completes the whole thing. It doesn't matter that much to you, to me I don't think it matters all that much if once in a while it doesn't happen. (Chloe, 31, P)

This extract and those that follow demonstrate the complexity of women's negotiation of the 'ultimate goal' representation and the gap between this and subjective experience. Those experiencing themselves as having problems with orgasm, in particular, find that their efforts to have orgasms leaves them feeling pressurized and with feelings of failure, inadequacy, embarrassment and frustration:

Sometimes I don't find it easy to reach orgasm. And so as wonderful as it is, and it is you know an incredible feeling, yes it kind of sometimes feels like the end goal for sex. And it doesn't need to be and it shouldn't be but I suppose I can make it that sometimes so I am much more aware of that with myself to try and stop myself from doing that, making it the end goal, and just enjoying the moment. I think it is sometimes a pressure. (Molly, 28, P)

*Interviewer:* What does having an orgasm mean to you?

*Interviewee:* I suppose it means giving yourself totally and totally trusting the person. I suppose sort of fulfilment sexually. And making sex quite fun instead of that intense worry (laughs): 'Will I be a failure, will I get away without having to have one?' (Ellen, 52, P)

The romanticized representation of orgasm as an end goal belies difficulties with experiencing it and produces anxiety and feelings of failure in those who see themselves as having problems with orgasm.

In sum, women share awareness of the idea that orgasm is the goal of sex. For some this chimes with their experience. Yet for most it is at odds with subjective experience, at least some of the time. This discrepancy not only produces negative feelings, it also appears to play a major role in constructing women's sense of having problems with orgasm. It also, however, results in reflection upon and negotiation of the veracity of the representation.

The resonance between the magazine and women's accounts is remarkable in terms of the glorification of orgasm as the peak of sexual experience. However, while the magazines hint at this having the potential to become a 'performance nuisance', for the women it is very much more than this: it contributes to feelings of failure and intense worry concerning sexual encounters, particularly in those who construe themselves as having problems with 'achieving' orgasm.

## *Theme: Clitoral versus vaginal orgasms*

### *Media perspective*

In the first decade of *Cosmopolitan's* existence (1972–1982),<sup>4</sup> there is recurrent discussion of the importance of clitoral stimulation. This often draws on the science of sex: 'All orgasms result from stimulation of the clitoris—whether direct (masturbation) or indirect (intercourse). The confusion arises from Sigmund Freud's theory ... Several years ago, Masters and Johnson's clinical studies refuted Freud's theory' (*Cosmopolitan*, 1979).

Many articles refute the idea that intercourse, without clitoral stimulation, produces orgasms: 'most women do not reach orgasm simply as a result of intercourse, and the minority of women who do, do so not so much from long thrusting as from individually created ways of getting specific clitoral stimulation during intercourse' (*Cosmopolitan*, 1981).

After 1982 the word clitoris tends to be mentioned in the context of different sexual positions and techniques and there is emphasis upon women not accepting patriarchally defined standards of sexuality: 'No longer do women accept the standard of sexuality traditionally set by male needs and desires. Sex as little more than a meeting of the genitals is out' (*Cosmopolitan*, 1993).

Thus a political stance is added to the focus on body parts and physiology (e.g. clitoral stimulation). Furthermore, relationships tend to be positioned as higher in priority than physiological satisfaction:

These days masturbation is said to be more satisfying than intercourse. Myth or fact? Very definitely myth! Masters and Johnson did find that, based on objective measurements of physiological not emotional response, masturbation brings a more intense reaction than intercourse. Even though orgasm might be more easily brought about this way, the relationship between two people having sexual contact is preferred. (*Cosmopolitan*, 1978)

### *Women's perspective*

There is considerable mention, in the women's talk, of the debate regarding clitoral versus vaginal orgasm. By the latter they mean orgasm reached without clitoral stimulation. One interviewee describes this debate as a myth from a past now discredited by feminists:

We were all told there were two kinds of orgasms, I know you think that's daft but that is how we were brought up right, there was the sort of self-inflicted one, it wasn't the real thing and

then there was the vaginal orgasm that you could only get with a man. (Tanya 63, NP)

The interviewee alludes to an understanding taken as common sense when she was growing up wherein vaginal orgasm was 'the real thing'. She construes clitoral orgasm as 'self-inflicted' in the way that pain can be. Beyond the negative connotations of the term, there is also a distinction made between clitoral orgasm as self-generated and vaginal orgasm as the product of sex with a man. The latter is the 'real thing' implying that the former is not. Although she talks of the vaginal/clitoral differentiation as a thing of the past, others indicate its ongoing influence. A number of interviewees say that there are different kinds of orgasm and that the vaginal variety is better:

I would like to be able to [experience orgasm by penetration] because I think it would just add to my pleasure and [my] partner's pleasure. (Daryl, 31, P)

I have to say in my experience that, kind of, it's very much deeper the vaginal orgasm. I think I have had that far far less. (Amber, 53, NP)

Although both of these interviewees have little or no experience of reaching vaginal orgasm, they romanticize its 'deeper' and more pleasurable qualities. Furthermore, it is represented as a sign of 'real womanhood':

I've always been able to have an orgasm with, you know, use a finger or orally but I feel it is just a problem that I can't have in penetrative sex which I would love to happen ... I feel it would be a deeper, stronger orgasm, and I feel it matches up to all the romantic books you read [laughing]. I feel I should be able to have them because all real women do. (Mary, 55, P)

This woman explicitly states that she experiences her lack of vaginal orgasms as 'a problem'. It is also important to note that she defines herself as having problems with orgasm despite her statement that she always has orgasms via non-penetrative means.

The idea that clitoral manipulation is an easier way to experience orgasm coexists within a social representation that values vaginal orgasm. Vaginal orgasm is represented as a more feminine and attractive experience:

I know that some women cannot have orgasms without having clitoral stimulation. So I know I am normal, but sometimes I give myself a hard time, I think 'damn, why can't I have an orgasm, why can't I have an orgasm without playing with myself?' Because I am sure it doesn't look nice,

you know, you having sex and then you got your arm up and you try (laughing) you know. (Florence, 30, P)

In sum, women's magazines put forward the idea that clitoral stimulation is important contextualizing this within the importance of relationships and of gender equality. By way of contrast, many of the women regard vaginal orgasm as superior. This leaves many with a sense that their clitorally induced orgasms are problematic and thus plays a major role in their sense of having problems with orgasm.

### **Theme: Not having orgasms as common yet problematic**

#### **Media perspective**

Both *Cosmopolitan* and *Woman's Weekly* describe absence of orgasm—clitoral or vaginal—as a common phenomenon. For example, in a reply to a woman who experiences orgasm only by masturbation, an Agony Aunt writes: 'Your ability to have an orgasm already places you ahead of many women who cannot manage it' (*Cosmopolitan*, 1981).

Using a competitive discourse she states that many women do not have orgasms. Attribution of responsibility for failure to reach orgasm is sometimes implied: 'I believe and cannot see any reason why every woman, if she really wants to, cannot achieve orgasm. It depends upon how we feel about ourselves as women' (*Cosmopolitan*, 1983).

Thus a woman's ability to achieve orgasm is linked to a positive sense of herself as a woman. As a corollary, both magazines see absence of orgasm as a source of negative emotions for women and, furthermore, as a cause of problems in relationships. For example:

She rarely had an orgasm without oral sex, but was too shy to let her lovers in on this. A failed relationship with a man she adored inspired her to change. 'One problem was he felt he couldn't satisfy me sexually, as he never knew what I wanted'. (*Cosmopolitan*, 1997)

The magazines implore women to solve problems with orgasm to prevent relationships from failing. Hence, women are ascribed responsibility for both their own difficulties and for men's emotional reactions to them.

Simultaneous to generating messages in which absence of orgasm is problematized, women's magazines also stress the importance of acceptance that one might not have an orgasm each time one has sex. Here accomplished womanhood entails knowing oneself:

I noticed that the more balanced and mature the woman, the less likely she was to be perturbed by lack of orgasm on occasions. These women had assessed their own orgasmic capacity and, providing that the frequency of experience remained stable, they were contented with it. (*Cosmopolitan*, 1972)

#### **Women's perspective**

When I read things addressed to women the impression that I get seems to be that it [orgasm] is a rather problematic area for them. There seems to be a lot of emphasis on how to achieve orgasm with the underlying assumption being that you haven't, that it would be difficult for you. (Leah, 53, P)

For this woman, messages in the social environment depict female orgasm as problematic and the emphasis on how to achieve it responds to this. Representing the experience of orgasm as 'a problematic area' for women does not question the assumption that women should experience it more frequently or its status as a key goal. Rather, it positions many women as dysfunctional.

This representation of dysfunctionality, together with the idea that orgasm is the goal of sex, stigmatizes those who do not experience regular orgasms. They describe feeling inadequate sexually and ashamed:

I hate the word [orgasm] because I have never had an orgasm ... it feels to me really really shameful. Not in my head, I know in my head it is not, it is just one of those things but it feels like difficult, really lacking ... inside I would be really ashamed to talk about it. I also felt like I was fooling men, that they would find out that I was absolutely rotten in bed. (Eve, 51, P)

The shame experienced by this woman relates to other's reactions to her absence of orgasm, particularly potential partners, rather than personal sadness. The emotional and relational difficulties linked with absence of orgasm are illuminated in this extract. Failure to have orgasms renders one 'rotten in bed' and, as others state, can damage their partners' self image and manhood, instigating feelings of insecurity. Hence, not reaching an orgasm creates pressures and tension within the relationship.

Concerning personal feelings, a number of interviewees say that for them absence of orgasm is not as much of a problem as 'the literature' suggests:

I suspect that it is over-rated ... When it didn't happen I didn't mind all that much. I didn't mind as much as I was led to believe I should mind



through reading the literature. I do think it's an over-emphasized feature. (Hillary, 49 NP)

The extract offers an alternative to the representation of absence of orgasm as dysfunction. The interviewee is aware of the social representation of orgasm and its absence—entombed in the literature—and challenges it. Perhaps related to this, she defines herself as a woman who does not have problems with orgasm even though the extract indicates that she is not someone who has an orgasm every time she has sex. Unlike her, many of the women who challenge the hegemony of the social representation are still left with negative feelings concerning their inability to experience orgasms.

In sum, absence of orgasm is represented by women's magazines as an identity-linked and relational problem. However, they purvey a co-existing message that occasional absence is to be expected and encourage women to strive for acceptance. For many of the women interviewed having problems with orgasm induces feelings of inadequacy, shame and worry concerning partners' reaction. However, in terms of subjective experience absence of orgasm is not regarded as devastating.

## Discussion

The key themes that emerged from the media and interview analyses were: (1) that orgasm is seen as a central indicator of sexual pleasure and goal of sex with the consequence that those who do not experience it feel pressurized by this vision; (2) that there is a debate about the body parts involved in orgasm, which introduces broader political and relational issues; and (3) that absence of orgasm tends to be connected to shame, an interpersonal emotion, rather than to sadness or other intrapersonal emotions.

The study corroborates existing literature on women's perspectives (Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Potts, 2000) finding that the women share a dominant social representation wherein orgasm is symbolized and valued as the goal of sex. Like in other studies, this pervasive awareness of the 'orgasmic imperative' links with feelings of dysfunctionality, shame and inadequacy (Lavie & Willig, 2005; Nicolson & Burr, 2003).

While this is the first systematic study of female orgasm in the mass media, its finding support research showing that women's magazines play an important role in shaping women's perceptions of womanhood and femininity (Ferguson, 1983; McRobbie, 1991; Winship, 1987) and in constructing

a collective female subjectivity (Ballaster et al., 1991). There is widespread spontaneous reference among the women in this study to women's magazines and, in particular, to the pressure they place on women to achieve orgasm. There is also repeated reference to their debate concerning the relative effectiveness of vaginal versus clitoral orgasm and, paradoxically, to their assumption that orgasm is a problematic arena for women.

What those who study women's magazines without examining women's perspectives overlook is that women position themselves differentially towards magazine content. Perhaps most salient is that the emphasis on the importance of the clitoris in *Cosmopolitan*, in particular, does not pervade the women's discourse and 'vaginal' orgasms are valorized as symbols of womanhood and as producing stronger, deeper sensations. Another salient difference is that a number of women separate out a public self that is ashamed of having problems with orgasm and a private self that is not fundamentally concerned about this lack. Thus external expectations impact upon levels of shame but do not necessarily leave women feeling personally saddened or at a loss.

The vaginal-clitoral debate in the magazines and women's talk contains the seeds of a history of scientific writing about sex. Interestingly, strong resonance of earlier, Freudian ideas still dominates the women's talk while the later Kinsey et al. and Masters and Jonhston ideas pervade the magazines. Women who experience themselves as having problems with orgasm often mean that they have problems with 'vaginal' orgasm, rather than the clitorally stimulated variety. Since 'vaginal' orgasms are constructed as those that designate mature and proper sexuality, for these women their absence confers feelings of inadequacy. This provides a vivid indication of how classical scientific writings can have emotional consequences for women. The 'experience' of having problems with orgasm draws not only on bodily sensation but on socially circulating ideas that often originate in scientific theory.

The focus on 'vaginal' orgasm in the data may be viewed in an alternative way. Since the relational and emotional aspects of sex are dominant for the women, so intercourse becomes the key site of intimacy and of satisfying partners. Thus the ideal orgasm becomes entwined with penetrative sex. This chimes with previous research that argues for the existence of what Jackson (1984) calls the 'coital imperative'. According to Gavey, McPhillips

and Braun (1999), beyond the sexual pleasure that women gain from vaginal intercourse, there is also a social representation of vaginal intercourse as the natural and normal way to have sex. This biologically driven discourse naturalizes intercourse and accords it an imperative status. It constructs and propagates the idea (or, indeed, the ideology) that women's and men's bodies are 'designed to fit'.

Neither of these two ways of interpreting the findings brings to light the resistance to dominant norms evident in other aspects of the data. The scientific writings on sex from the first half of the 20th century diminish differences between male and female sexuality pointing to physiological similarities. Yet, both the magazines and the women represent sexuality in terms of the binaries evident in western thought; men and women are opposite in terms of dimensions such as active/passive and reason/emotion (Roberts et al., 1995; Potts, 2000). Thus differences between the genders are highlighted. This is most pronounced in the representation of female orgasm in poetic, emotional and relational terms as opposed to the mechanical nature of male orgasm. This conceptualization resists sexologists' focus on physiology and the uniformity of sexual response across genders. Instead, it links sex with intimacy and romance. However, it does so by strengthening traditional conceptualizations of the genders and their bodies.

The study contains a number of limitations. In the vein of social representations research more generally and the majority of contemporary media studies, it does not look at the direct impact of the chosen media on the sample of women. Rather it ascribes to a cultivation view whereby widely circulating media—in this case those known to be important sources of sexual knowledge for the women—absorb and cultivate cultural norms in a gradual manner rather than having direct effects.

Women's sense of having problems with the orgasm-related aspect of sexual health stems from cultural and social expectations in concert with psychological/subjective experience. If the cultural and social norms associated with having orgasms were laid bare, the set of anxieties they produce might be reduced and this, in turn, may diminish women's experience of having problems with orgasm.

## Notes

1. The researcher over-sampled until she had the desired number of women with and without problems in each age category. She then randomly

removed the interviews of those not needed from the data corpus.

2. Since people had been sampled to fit certain criteria (age and defining themselves as having problems with orgasm or not) the questionnaire was used as a record of verification rather than analysed in its own right.
3. All the names have been changed, the number is the interviewee's age at the time of the interview and the letters represent her definition of herself as having problems with orgasm (P) or not having problems with orgasm (NP).
4. This section only includes *Cosmopolitan* as there were no references to the clitoris in *Woman's Weekly*.

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