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Multiple Indicators of Subjective Sexual Arousal

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Three self-report measures of subjective sexual arousal were developed to serve as standard measures. Construction of the measures was designed to permit comparison of male and female subjective sexual arousal. To secure more uniform measurement across laboratories, item selection and analysis were guided by past research and theory, and careful attention was paid to the psychometric properties of the measures. From the perspective of involvement theory (Mosher, 1980), subjective sexual arousal is defined as a specific affect-cognition blend, in consciousness, of physiological sexual arousal with its accompanying sexual affects. The multiple indicators of self-reported sexual arousal were derived from past research that had variously used Likert-type rating scales (Jakobovits, 1965; Mosher & Abramson, 1977; Schmidt & Sigusch, 1970), adjective checklists (Mosher & Abramson, 1977; Mosher & Greenberg, 1969), and a checklist of genital sensations (Mosher & Abramson, 1977; Schmidt & Sigusch, 1970). Mosher, Barton-Henry, and Green (1988) developed the three measures of subjective sexual arousal presented here.

Descriptions and Scoring

Ratings of Sexual Arousal consists of the five items, selected from a pool of 11 items, yielding the highest alpha coefficients across self-reports to four types of erotic fantasies. The five items selected were sexual arousal, genital sensations, sexual warmth, nongenital physical sensations, and sexual absorption. Each item is further defined: for example, “Sexual Warmth—a subjective estimate of the amount of sexual warmth experienced in the genitals, breasts, and body as a function of increasing vasocongestion (i.e., engorgement with blood).” If a sixth item is desired, the next best item is “Sexual Tension—subjective estimate of the sexual tension that presses toward release.” A 7-point Likert-type format is used to rate the items with anchors of, for example, 1, no sexual arousal at all to 7, extremely sexually aroused. This measure is appropriate for educated populations of men and women. The definitions of the concepts include technical vocabulary.

Respondents respond to these instructions: “For each item, place a circle around the number that best describes how you felt during the experience.” Average completion time is 2 minutes. Scores are summed and a mean item score can be calculated. Higher scores indicate more subjective sexual arousal.

Affective Sexual Arousal consists of five adjective prompts selected from a pool of 10 items embedded in a 70-item adjective checklist patterned after the Differential Emotions Scale (Izard, Doughty, Bloxom, & Kotsch, 1974; Mosher & White, 1981). The adjective prompts that were included, following the item analysis across the four erotic fantasies, were sexually aroused, sensuous, turned-on, sexually hot, and sexually excited. If a sixth item is needed, it should be “sexy.” Each adjective prompt was rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale as follows: 1, very slightly or not at all; 2, slightly; 3, moderately; 4, considerably; or 5, very strongly. This measure of subjective sexual arousal contains standard and slang vocabulary understandable by both men and women, but it probably should be embedded within an affect adjective checklist.

Respondents respond by circling the number which best describes “how they felt during the experience.” Completion time can be estimated at 10 items per minute if embedded in a larger affect checklist. Scores are summed across the five items, and a mean item score can be computed. Higher scores indicate more subjective sexual arousal.

Genital Sensations is an 11-item checklist modified from earlier versions of self-reports of genital sensations (Mosher & Abramson, 1977; Schmidt & Sigusch, 1970) by placing the items in an ordinal order and by writing brief descriptions of the genital sensations and bodily responses. The 11 items are as follows: no genital sensations, onset of genital sensations, mild genital sensations, moderate genital sensations, prolonged moderate genital sensations, intense genital sensations, prolonged intense genital sensations, mild orgasm, moderate orgasm, intense orgasm, and multiple orgasm. An example of the definitions given is “(4) Moderate genital sensations—vasocongestion sufficient to erect penis fully or to lubricate vagina fully.” The vocabulary is appropriate for educated populations, but the arrangement into an ordered scale educates and helps a less educated group to respond.

Respondents check the peak or highest level of genital sensations felt during the experience, and, thus, achieve a score of 1 to 11. The measure requires 2 to 3 minutes to complete.

Reliability

Cronbach alpha coefficients for the two 5-item measures—Ratings of Sexual Arousal and Affective Sexual Arousal—in a sample of 120 male and 121 female college students, as measured across four fantasy conditions, ranged from .92 to .97 and were robust across erotic conditions (Mosher et al., 1988). Median Cronbach alpha coefficients for Ratings of Sexual Arousal were .97 and for Affective Sexual Arousal were .96.

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Validity

Evidence of convergent validity between the measures when cast into an intercorrelation matrix was strong, with a median validity coefficient—same scale across erotic conditions—of .52. Intercorrelations of the three measures of subjective sexual arousal within an erotic condition revealed median intercorrelations of approximately .81 for Ratings of Sexual Arousal with Affective Sexual Arousal, .74 for Ratings of Sexual Arousal with Sensations, and .69 of Affective Sexual Arousal with Genital Sensations (Mosher et al., 1988). Further evidence of construct validity is available in the body of literature cited above which used similar measures.

References


Exhibit

Multiple Indicators of Subjective Sexual Arousal

Ratings of Sexual Arousal

Instructions: For each item, place a circle around one number that best described how you felt during the experience.

1. Sexual Arousal—a subjective estimate of your overall level of sexual arousal.

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   No sexual arousal at all
   Extremely sexually aroused

2. Genital Sensations—a subjective estimate of the amount and quality of sensation experienced in your genitals.

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   No sensation at all
   Extreme genital sensation

3. Sexual Warmth—a subjective estimate of the amount of sexual warmth experienced in the genitals, breasts and body as a function of increasing vasocongestion, i.e., engorgement with blood.

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   No sexual warmth at all
   Extreme sexual warmth

4. Non-Genital Physical Sensations—a subjective estimate of the physical sensations such as tickling, floating, or fullness that accompany your experience of sexual arousal.

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   No sensation at all
   Extreme non-genital physical sensation

5. Sexual Absorption—a subjective estimate of your level of absorption in the sensory components of the experience.

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7
   No absorption at all
   Extreme absorption
Ratings of Affective Sexual Arousal

Instructions: This scale consists of a number of words that describe different emotions or feelings. Please indicate the extent to which each word describes the way you felt during the preceding experiences. Record your answers by indicating the appropriate number on the five-point scale on the attached answer sheet. Presented below is the scale for indicating the degree to which each word describes the way you feel.

1       2        3         4         5
Very slightly  Slightly  Moderately  Considerably  Very strongly

In deciding on your answer to a given item or word, consider the feeling connoted or defined by that word. Then, if during the experience you felt that way very slightly or not at all, you would darken the blank under the number 1 on the scale; if you felt that way to a moderate degree, you would darken the blank under 3; if you felt that way very strongly, you would darken the circle under 5, and so forth.

Remember, you are requested to make your responses on the basis of the way you felt during the experience. Work at a good pace. It is not necessary to ponder; the first answer you decide on for a given word is probably the most valid. It should not take more than a few minutes to complete the scale.

Items:
1. Sexually aroused
2. Sensuous
3. Turned-on
4. Sexually hot
5. Sexually excited

Ratings of Genital Sensations

Instructions: Genital sensations refer to sensory sensations in the genital region that accompany any source of somatogenic or psychogenic sexual stimulation and that are a function of increasing vasocongestion in the genital area. Males experience these sensations as accompaniments of penile erections and females experience these sensations as a function of the engorgement of the labia and the orgasmic platform in the vagina with accompanying vaginal lubrication. Below, indicate the peak level of genital sensation that you felt during the experience. The items are:

_____ 1. No genital sensations.
_____ 2. Onset of genital sensations—onset of swelling of penis or vulva or nipple erection.
_____ 3. Mild genital sensations—vasocongestion sufficient to begin penile erection or to begin vaginal lubrication.
_____ 4. Moderate genital sensations—vasocongestion sufficient to erect penis fully or to lubricate vagina fully.
_____ 5. Prolonged moderate genital sensations—maintain erection for several minutes or considerable vaginal lubrication for several minutes.
_____ 6. Intense genital sensations—hard or pulsing erection and elevation of testicles in the scrotum; or receptive, engorged vagina or sex flush, or breast swelling or retraction of clitoris or ballooning of vagina.
_____ 7. Prolonged intense genital sensations—near orgasmic levels of genital sensations; swelling of head of penis or high levels of muscular tension or heavy breathing or high heart rate; lasting several minutes and will produce orgasm if continued.
_____ 9. Moderate orgasm—moderate orgasmic release, average time to resolution of vasocongestion, 5–8 contractions.
_____ 10. Intense orgasm—intense orgasmic release with rapid resolution of vasocongestion, 8–12 contractions.
_____ 11. Multiple orgasm—repeated orgasmic release in a single sexual episode.

*These instructions assume the five sexual prompts are embedded within a longer affect adjective checklist.