



## Sex satisfaction – science? Or fathomed?

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## Sex satisfaction – science? Or fathomed?

This issue has a focus on sexual satisfaction, broadly speaking. Many of the articles focus on positive and negative influences on sexual satisfaction and expression – and then we have a few “spicy” articles in here that are sure to spark thoughtful debate. As an academic-clinician I am always interested in what is new and emerging in the field, while trying to keep an open mind to the results that others have found (unique as they may be). This issue has many reads on the interplay between satisfaction enhancers and detractors, biomedical influences on satisfaction and self, fantasy and imagery, and includes a new scale for use in considering how sexual experiences and partnership work hand-in-hand.

There are three articles that focus on sexual satisfaction (Cetin & Aslan, 2020; Hadizadeh-Talasaz et al., 2019) and self-love (Weitkamp et al., 2019) as connected to functioning for female-identified (sample of cisgender) women. These articles highlight new information uncovered about the positive impact therapeutic intervention can have on biomedical illness that a woman faces (Hadizadeh-Talasaz et al., 2019; Weitkamp et al., 2019). Specifically, these articles shed light in the areas of knowledge/awareness, education, and mindfulness.

Cetin and Aslan (2020) article provides guidance and insight into how hormonal levels impact a woman’s mental health well-being in conjunction with sexual satisfaction and functioning, based on menstrual phase. While their study did not find statistically significant differences, it was determined that women in the luteal phase of their menstrual cycle did report higher levels of sexual satisfaction and functioning. Hadizadeh-Talasaz et al. (2019) examine and report on the lived experiences of women who are struggling with pelvic organ prolapse; specifically finding that those with this condition will experience discomfort, lower genital self-image, have lower rates of well-being, and several women reported conflicting relational reactions. This research has implications for the relational or systemic therapist; don’t forget that even though the person in front of you may be experiencing the biomedical difficulty, their relationships will have been impacted as well.

Finally, Weitkamp et al. (2019) interviewed participants from an online educational program entitled, “Self:Cervix,” which is an educational outlet with the goal to release pain and decrease numbness in the female genital region through learning about sexual anatomy, massage, integrating mindfulness, and discussing consent. Their work highlights the importance of education and self-exploration, providing examples of how massage and mindfulness can have a substantial impact on feelings of pain and numbness in the cervix. All three of these articles integrated together speak to the relationship between women, their body, and the impact that acceptance of self

can have. Through education, permission, and intervention—these studies highlight the need for increasing radical self-acceptance.

One of the more “flavorful” articles in this issue is that presented by Jiao et al. (2019)—in which their research provided evidence that masturbation rates among men who attended Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, China, had a significant negative impact on overall mental health and reproductive health issues. Many in the field of sexuality would look at this information and immediately balk at the idea – thinking, *how can masturbation be bad? This can't be right!*, but in this study that is exactly what was found. They were able to find significance related to increases in anxiety, fatigue, soreness and weakness in the lumbar region, cognitive issues such as memory decline, insomnia, etc. The authors, however, are not attempting to generalize their findings to the world. In fact, they specifically state that the findings are most likely influenced by cultural and societal values. They further acknowledge and state that there is very little research evidence published in connection to masturbation and connections to the difficulties that they found. As a starting place for discussion, it is important to consider that they reported that the average respondent stated having masturbated around six times per month, while recent estimates put that number a little low in comparison to say United States men, who masturbate approximately two times per week on average (Peters et al., 2022).

If you are looking or wanting to get more objective information on sexual experiences and partnership quality—Kroll et al.'s (2019) article describes the development of the Questionnaire on Sexual Experience and Partnership Quality (Q-Sex-PaQ) or the Q sex pack measure for short, which is a new instrument designed to be taken to examine how sexual experiences vary when considering partnerships in the same age group. It is important to note that beyond this study additional research is needed to determine the impact of varying age group couple relationships.

An incredibly interesting case report is published in this issue as well. Kurtz-Almog (2020) reports on the changes one client experienced post-prostate cancer treatment. Specifically, the author's client found themselves suddenly attracted to members of the same sex and gender expression, which happened to be disconcerting to the formerly comfortable heterosexually identified man. Specifically, the author encourages and recommends heavy emotional support for clients who are undergoing treatment of sexual organs, while also having unconditional positive regard for current life attractions.

A true joy to read in this issue is Jamea's (2020) article in which sensuality, imagination, and curiosity are noted as playing a significant part in optimal sexual satisfaction. The author discovered that those with high or optimal sexual functioning and satisfaction had higher rates of sensual experiences, higher reported imagination, and openness to questions and experiences. Specific recommendations include shifting the focus away from behavioral or intervention-heavy sex therapy, and instead taking the clients down a path determined to highlight the need for more creative endeavors. This frees the mind to focus on the interpersonal and relational interactions while enjoying sensations and individual reactions. One of my favorite quotes from this article is, “... *perhaps great sex begins with fostering the nonsexual aspects of personality*”

(p. 13). This is such an incredibly powerful statement and a reminder for all therapists, educators, and counselors that sexual satisfaction and functioning is not just about behavior and expectations, it is so much more about the experience itself.

Similarly, Lindley et al. (2020) present an article discussing how sexual fantasy is different—and similar—among gender diverse persons, including cisgender people. Specifically, they interviewed 22 cisgender and 22 nonbinary persons to discover differences in sexual fantasies. We all know that sexual fantasy can lead to higher rates of desire and sexual satisfaction, but in this article the authors get into the process of what it means to engage in fantasizing about sex, as well as who and what people fantasize about who are of varying gender expressions. Fantasies of nonbinary people were very similar to those of their cisgender counterparts, but instead of visualizing “normative” genitals, their sexual imagery or fantasies included non-gender specific genital structures and decentralizing of themselves as the point of pleasure. This unique outcome highlights differences in the way in which gender socialization has played a major role in sexual attractions, roles, and schemas. Therapists and educators can use this information to inform the development of sexual health and satisfaction workshops and programs, along with adjusting the conceptualization of cases to fit what could be considered more “normative” for nonbinary folk—eliminating hurtful isomorphic assumptions of sameness with cisgender counterparts.

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