

Experiences and Representations of the Presence and Absence of Female Orgasm

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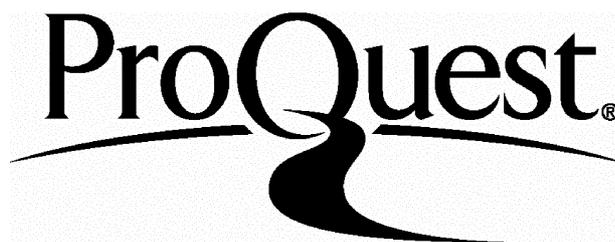
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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to gain a greater understanding of women's experience of orgasm, and in particular, problems with the experience. Many women experience problems with orgasm. Notwithstanding the frequency of this phenomenon, it is understudied within psychology. This relates to the more general failure of sex research to acknowledge both the subjective and the social perspectives of phenomena.

The theoretical grounds for this thesis are social representations approach and the embodiment approach. Informed by its theoretical basis, this thesis triangulates methodologically. The first section is constituted of a media analysis of two widely read British women's magazines. The second section draws on a semi-structured interview-based study, consisting of 50 interviews with women from three age groups, who define themselves as either having or not having problems with orgasm

The findings are wide-ranging and far-reaching. Firstly, orgasm is found to be a multi-dimensional experience: physical, emotional and relational. Secondly, the subjective experience of problems with orgasm is constructed differently by different women, largely in relation to their partners' reactions. Thirdly, the social representation of orgasm glorifies the experience and simultaneously pathologises women who do not have orgasms. Finally, the consequences of the findings outlined above are that they have a negative impact upon women's self image.

As this thesis broadens the academic understanding of female orgasm, it hopes to contribute to a change in the social representation of female orgasm, which will empower both women and men.

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Overview of Chapter One

The chapter commences with an historical overview of the modifications in professional understanding of the female orgasm. These modifications have been influenced by the shifting social position of sex and sexuality in Western society during the last century. The overview puts forward a feminist alternative to the traditional physiological focus of previous research and its exploration of female sexuality through the prism of male sexuality. The second part of the chapter critically reviews the contemporary literature on female orgasm and 'female orgasmic disorder', which offers a one-dimensional approach to the subject and ignores the social aspects of women's experiences. The review recognises a gap in the existing literature in terms of understanding the social context of female orgasm and orgasmic disorder.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Aim of the thesis

This thesis aims to explore women's experiences of presence and absence of orgasm. It examines women's accounts of these experiences and their social representation as evident from interviews with women and a content analysis of women's magazines. The thesis identifies the negative impact that the current social representation of female orgasm has on women. The *raison d'être* of the thesis is to bring to light and accentuate women's perspective. This research domain has been strongly influenced by the biomedical approach, which over-emphasises the physiological aspect of such experiences. Changing the scientific understanding of female orgasm is particularly important since science plays an important role in the construction of social representations of female orgasm.

1.2 Literature review on the presence and absence of female orgasm

1.2.1 Introduction

General population surveys indicate that between 5-15% of sexually active women have never experienced orgasm (Birnbaum-Lichtenstein, 1998; Hite, 1976; Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gebhard, 1953; Spector & Carey, 1990). Furthermore, several studies demonstrate that approximately 60% of women report frequency of orgasm to be less

than desired (Davidson & Moore, 1994; Rosen, Taylor, Leiblum, & Bechmann, 1993). Hence, orgasm is experienced as problematic for many women and the nature of this experience must be investigated if change is to be instigated.

During the Victorian era, orgasm was portrayed as unhealthy and immoral for women. Morally correct women were not supposed to enjoy sex (Archer & Lloyd, 1982). Most people, including medical professionals, were not aware of the existence of female orgasm or the function of the clitoris. In 1869 orgasm was believed to cause uterine disease (Tannahill, 1989), and in 1871 some professionals offered treatment to solve the 'problem' of orgasm in women (Wakefield, 1988).

During the last century, the way in which female orgasm was regarded was transformed. At the beginning of the 20th century, its image was beginning to change from being negative to being positive, as it was regarded as something that could strengthen the institution of marriage. Marriage manuals began to appear in the 1900s arguing for the importance of good sex for the success of a marital relationship. These manuals informed their readers that the husband's duty was to satisfy his wife, so that, like him, she would reach orgasm (Robie, 1916; Stopes, 1918; Van de Valde, 1926 as cited in McLaren, 1999). Indeed, those manuals were the first to bring up the notions of multiple and simultaneous orgasms. Influenced by these new concepts and Freud's theories, orgasm was now linked with femininity (McLaren, 1999), as well as masculinity.

Since the Second World War, the perception of female orgasm has been further modified (Davidson & Darling, 1989). Three factors have influenced the modification: Kinsey et al.'s (1948, 1953) and Masters and Johnson's (1966, 1970) research (Garnets & Peplau, 2000; Heath, 1982); the sexual revolution (Davidson & Moore, 1994; Heath, 1982); and the increasing role of sexuality in modern life (Darling & Davidson, 1986; Garnets & Peplau, 2000; Tiefer, 1995).

1.2.2 Modifications in perceptions of female orgasm

1.2.2.1 Kinsey's and Masters and Johnson's research

The most widely disseminated and influential sex studies of the past century were those of Kinsey and Masters and Johnson. Both sets of work were innovative for their era, and strongly influenced the public view about sexuality in general, and female sexuality and orgasm in particular. Both argued for the similarity between female and male sexuality by emphasising the physiological aspects of sexuality.

Kinsey was a biologist who explored sexual behaviour in North America. His books, published in 1948 and 1953, provided statistics on the incidence of almost every sexual activity and sexual response, broken down by class, age, educational level and 'racialised identity'. He illustrated to the American people that certain sexual activities and responses were far more common than might have been expected, exemplified in the percentage of women who experienced orgasm (Nye, 1999). Consequently, he deflated

the Victorian myth that women, especially moral women, do not experience orgasm, a myth that had not yet perished in his time.

As sex therapists, Masters and Johnson attempted to establish a scale of female and male sexual psycho-physiological response in order to reach an objective judgement of sexual dysfunction (Masters & Johnson, 1970). Their research, which was conducted in a laboratory, observed couples in coitus, and single men and women masturbating (Davidson & Layder, 1994). Masters and Johnson's key finding was the description of the 'human sexual response cycle', which was divided into four stages: excitement, plateau, orgasm and resolution (Masters & Johnson, 1966).

At the time when Kinsey and Masters and Johnson published their studies, it was believed that sexuality was a negative urge, which required social scrutiny (Gagnon & Parker, 1995). Both piece of research held certain common underlying assumptions about sexuality and science. Like many today, they regarded sex as a natural force or an inner drive (Michael, Gagnon, Laumann, & Skolata, 1994). Both were motivated by their wish to contradict the traditional view of sexuality. They believed in the privileged character of scientific knowledge and wanted to use science to 'liberate sex' from social constrains (Nye, 1999; Gerhard, 2000).

Kinsey and Masters and Johnson held similar opinions about female orgasm. They considered orgasm to be the main indicator of sexual pleasure. They argued against the idea of vaginal orgasm and of the term 'frigidity' with its connotation of unwillingness or

incapacity to function sexually. They thought that women have the same physiological capacity as men to be orgasmic and a greater capacity to experience multiple orgasms.

1.2.2.2 The sexual revolution

The 1960s are known as the 'sexual revolution' for the reason that sexual attitudes and behaviour changed dramatically in the direction of sexual liberalism (Wouters, 1998). Although some argue that this term is exaggerated (e.g. Smith, 1990), many studies conducted in that period observed changes in various sexual behaviours and attitudes (Robinson, Ziss, Ganza, Katz, & Robinson, 1991). These changes were mainly influenced by student protests, counter cultural movements and the development of birth control pills (Tannahill, 1980). In the 1960s, sexual liberation became a key factor in political life. Sectors in Western society came to believe belief that free sex was the apotheosis of freedom. The concept of being sexually active became a 'stand alone', separated from the institution of marriage and procreation in the mind of many, especially youngsters (Lindner, 1994).

In this period, female orgasm was in the spotlight of the feminist sexual revolution (Gerhard, 2000; Heath, 1982). Women's Movements supported and encouraged women to 'discover' and celebrate their sexuality and promoted women's masturbation (Lindner, 1994). Feminists wanted to construct a new female sexuality rooted in the practice of pleasure rather than in heterosexual intercourse or reproduction (Gerhard, 2000). They utilized Masters and Johnson's ideas about women's multi-orgasmic capacity through

clitoral stimulation, and the similarity between male and female sexuality, to argue against old conceptions of female sexuality. Many feminists believed that emphasis on the clitoris as woman's primary sexual organ would lead to fundamental changes in the perception of sexuality, since the clitoral orgasm was seen as independent from both procreation and the penis (Tiefer, 1995).

1.2.2.3 Increasing role of sexuality in modern life

Since the second half of the 20th century, sex has been increasingly commercialised (D'Emilio & Freedman 1997; Tiefer, 1995). Symbols of sex and sexuality abound. Sex has become a main component of Western mass consumer culture (Moffatt, 1989). The mass media has become the major vehicle for the display of sexuality and has a major role in the representation of sexuality in all its aspects (Gagnon & Parker, 1995). The relationship between sex and the mass media has given sexuality an increasing visibility in Western societies. This is also likely to have an impact upon people's experience of sex. Those whom have little or no sexual experience are faced with images that force them into a position of knowing about their lack.

This increasing visibility of sex has influenced its movement from the private into the public realm in other ways too. Since the sexual revolution, sex has moved out of the private realm and has become part of people's social identity (Garnets & Peplau, 2000). Nowadays, sexual relationships are supposed to provide not only endless happiness but also identity and psychological support. It has been argued that with the breakdown of

many social institutions, such as religion and the family, and the growing alienation that characterises the modern world, sex is expected, increasingly, to provide feelings of authenticity and connection (White, 1980).

1.2.3 New perspectives on sex research

Since the late 1970s, feminists' question the idea of female and male sexual similarity, and of the physiological emphasis prevalent in sex research (Gagnon & Parker, 1995; Gerhard, 2000). Together with the social constructionist scholars, they argue against the existing school of thought that employs a universal understanding of sexual behaviour and disregards contextual differences (Segal, 1994; Smith, Flowers & Osborn, 1997; Tiefer, 1995). They seek to understand sexuality in psychological, relational and social terms rather than in physical terms (Tiefer, 1995). Many researchers consider the social and cultural context of sexuality as a subject for analysis in itself (Granets & Peplau, 2000) and believe that the focus of sex research should shift from the individual to society and history (Lindenbaum, 1995). Those changes in attitudes toward sex research are in part the outcome of criticism of Kinsey's and Masters and Johnson's studies.

One critique levelled at Kinsey's research is that it produced a partial picture of sexuality, in that it investigate the incidence of sexual behaviour but without acknowledging the meaning people attach to it (Davidson & Layder, 1994). For example, whilst the research studied the frequency of orgasm for women, it did not contain any data on the importance of orgasm for them. Orgasm was used as an index of sexual achievement and enjoyment,

though this was not based on women's perspective on female sexuality. Since Kinsey's era, the question of frequency of orgasm has become a central question in sex research and a main indicator for sexual enjoyment. However, the question of the importance of orgasm for women remains under-explored (Nicolson, 1993).

Masters and Johnson are criticised for separating observed behaviours from mental and social processes (Tiefer, 1995), and neglecting the subjective-cognitive aspects of sexual responses and acts (Robinson, 1976; Zilbergeld & Ellison, 1980). Their research extracted the sexual act from its social context by conducting the observations in a laboratory environment, an environment totally different from, and non-representative of the setting within which human sexual activity normally takes place. By excluding the context of the sexual act, Masters and Johnson altered its meaning. Though their primary goal was to establish a psycho-physiological account of the human sexual response, their focus concentrated upon physical measurements. In addition, they ignored gender inequality in heterosexual relationships. They expected women to take more sexual initiative and assigned women with the major responsibility for overcoming any sexual problems (Segal, 1994). Hence, their method and theoretical assumptions excluded the subjective, mental and social aspects of human sexuality.

Both Kinsey and Masters and Johnson are criticised for exploring female sexuality through the prism of male sexuality (Kalb & Joseph, 2000; Nicolson, 1993; Ussher, 1993). It is suggested that Kinsey's second volume, 'Sexual behaviour in the human female' is the equivalent of his first volume about male sexuality; however, it fails to

explore differing aspects of female sexuality. Similar criticism can be levelled at Masters and Johnson's 'human sexual response cycle', with orgasm seen as the single universal goal of this cycle. Studies show that emotional communication and intimacy in sexual relationships are more important for women than the experience of orgasm. By focusing only upon the physical aspects of sex, the human sexual response cycle denies women's voice (Tiefer, 1995).

The psychiatric diagnosis of sexual problems as a distinct classification first appeared in the 3rd edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 1980 (DSM). It is Masters and Johnson's work and their definition of the 'human sexual response cycle', which has had the main impact on this definition (Vroege, Gijs & Hengeveld, 1998). Indeed, despite growing criticism, Masters and Johnson's work and the physiological approach in general have continued to influence this field. Even today, this approach is highly influential (Ussher, 1993).

1.3 The current state of female orgasm research

The previous section described the historical background of sex research in the 20th century, which is dominated by Kinsey's and Masters and Johnson's research and was influenced by social and political events. This section proceeds from the broad context and focuses specifically on female orgasm research.

The female orgasm research domain has been criticised by many for being unsystematically investigated and characterised by insufficient data (Fisher, 1973; Mah & Binik, 2001; Prozan, 1992). In particular, throughout the 20th century this research field has been characterised by four long-term disputes: reasons, labelling, definitions and types, as outlined below:

1.3.1 The Search for Reasons

Psychological studies of 'female orgasmic disorder' most often focus on its etiological aspects. Several explanations for this condition have been addressed and examined, yet the findings are not conclusive. The existing studies are described and evaluated below:

- **The fear of flying**

Fisher (1973) suggests the term 'fear of flying' for women who have a fear of experiencing orgasm. According to Fisher, problems with orgasm mainly result from a fear of object loss. As sexual excitement creates a feeling that the outer-world is 'fading', this can elicit anxiety in those who are concerned with the lack of dependability of love objects. This may prevent sexual arousal from building up to orgasmic level. Fisher connects this to the interaction between women and their fathers. The father is the first and the most important figure through whom a woman learns to trust a man. His research finds a correlation between a lack of orgasm and a 'real' or 'psychologically' absent father. However, these results have not been studied further, and therefore have not been contested or supported. In a related vein, Fried (1960) suggests a theory about the link

between lack of orgasm and fear of loss of control. Fried argues that the intensity of sexual feelings and of the sexual act depends upon the ability to enjoy the regressive process and on being in a vulnerable position. According to him, problems with orgasm are rooted in fears of loss of control. Again, this theory has not been investigated further (as cited in Prozan, 1992).

- **Inability to communicate effectively**

Research about sexual preferences and other intimate issues illustrates a link between inability to communicate effectively and inability to experience orgasm. Kelly, Strassberg and Kircher (1990) found that in their inorgasmic group there was significantly more anticipated discomfort regarding communicating with partners than in the control group, but only concerning those sexual activities involving direct clitoral stimulation. However, it must be noted that McCabe (1997) did not find any difference in sexual intimacy and sexual communication between orgasmic and inorgasmic women.

- **Sexual guilt**

Fisher (1973) found no correlation between degree of guilt and orgasmic consistency. Kelly et al.'s (1990) research, which found low level of guilt in both inorgasmic and orgasmic women, suggested that inorgasmic women actually experience more sexual guilt than orgasmic women. Others confirmed the link between sexual guilt and lack of orgasm (Davidson & Moore, 1994). However, not enough substantial evidence has been

collected to empirically determine whether sexual guilt is indeed linked to inorgasmia or not.

- **Religious orthodoxy**

Masters and Johnson (1970) argued that religious orthodoxy was the most common reason for orgasmic dysfunction between their participants. However, Fisher (1973), who reviewed the research in this field, did not find a correlation between the two. More recently, Michael et al. (1994) corroborated this lack of correlation. In fact, women with no religious affiliation were less likely to report that they always have an orgasm than Protestant and Catholic women.

- **Lack of experience**

Much research concerning women who have been married for at least one year, found no correlation between sexual practice and lack of orgasm (Fisher, 1973; Kelly et al., 1990; Raboch & Raboch, 1992; Terman, 1951). On the other hand, Kinsey et al. (1953) found a gradual decline in the frequency of orgasm in marital coitus as years pass. Finally, Schover (1996), based on a review of 101 references, claimed that a woman's capacity to reach orgasm increases with experience.

Other reasons have been examined without conclusive findings (see Ussher, 1993). One of the problems with these studies is that their correlational nature makes it difficult to draw inferences concerning the cause-effect relationship (Davidson & Layder, 1994). Another critique is that of generalisation. For reasons of convenience, the majority of the

research uses samples inclined towards a high level of education and socio-economic classes. This causes a problem since some studies find a negative correlation between high levels of education, high socio-economic class and prevalence of inorgasmia (Fisher, 1973; Kinsey et al., 1953). In addition, many of the studies in this area rely on volunteers. It seems that, particularly in sexual research, this creates sample biases (Kelly et al., 1990)¹.

Ussher (1993) critiques the existing literature on the etiological aspect of problems with orgasm, suggesting that it attempts to find a one-dimensional explanation. What is needed is a multidimensional approach that takes into account the cultural and historical contexts together with the physiological and cognitive aspects (Bancroft, 1984).

1.3.2 Labels

The second unresolved debate in the literature regards the question of labelling. Labelling of phenomenon is one of the most basic and important processes in facilitating communication between researchers (McAnulty, 1995). Professionals have not yet found an acceptable name for the condition of not experiencing orgasm; as a result, different labels are used for the condition, depending upon the writers' theoretical background and their views on the issue. The absence of a label creates difficulties in the delineation of the phenomenon prevalence and in the classification of women who come to therapy (Birnbaum-Lichtenstein, 1998).

¹ See section 3.2.2 for further discussion of this.

Many different labels have been proposed over the years. Psychoanalysts use the term 'frigidity' to describe the condition of a woman, who does not experience orgasm through vaginal penetration (Prozan, 1995). However, this term is not commonly used nowadays. DSMIII uses the term 'Inhibited female orgasm'. The use of this term assumes that an orgasm is psychologically inhibited by anxiety (McAnulty, 1995). When this was contradicted, a new term appeared in DSM IV, 'female orgasmic disorder', which added a new aspect to the definition, taking into account woman's distress, as follows:

The essential feature of female orgasmic disorder is a persistent or recurrent delay in, or absence of, orgasm following a normal sexual excitement (Criterion A). Women exhibit wide variability in the type or intensity of stimulation that triggers orgasm. The diagnosis of female orgasm disorder should be based on the clinician's judgment that the woman's orgasmic capacity is less than reasonable for her age, sexual experience, and the adequacy of sexual stimulation she receives. The disturbance must cause marked distress or interpersonal difficulty (Criterion B) (DSM IV, 1994:505).

Wakefield (1988) argues that the definition in DSM IV, which includes the aspect of adequate stimulation, changes the incidence of this condition. She examined the main studies (like Kinsey, Masters and Johnson and Hite) and concluded that out of the 10% usually reported in surveys as inorgasmic, only about 1.4% are women who have never experienced orgasm despite adequate sexual stimulation.

Other labels used are 'low in orgasmic consistency' (Fisher, 1973), 'inorgasmia', 'anorgasmia' and 'Orgasmic dysfunction/disorder'. In recent years 'Female orgasmic disorder' is the most common term (Schover, 1996). In addition, sexual therapists, feminists and researchers divide the term into different sub-categories, such as 'preorgasmic' and 'nonorgasmic' or primary, secondary, situational, coital and random anaorgasmia.

Since little has been established as to what is the appropriate label for women who see themselves as having problems with orgasm, the choice of term relies upon one's assumptions concerning the phenomenon. Wakefield (1988) distinguishes between a disorder and a problem, and argues that a disorder is a phenomenon in which there is a harmful change from the natural way the organism functions, whilst problem is a concern that might be the focus of professional attention but is not a dysfunction. This thesis refrains from classifying the condition as a disorder, and adopts the term 'problems with orgasm'.

1.3.3 Clitoris versus vagina

The third debate that appears in the literature is about different kinds of orgasm. It was Freud who introduced the concept of two kinds of orgasm, clitoral and vaginal. This started the debate about the importance of different parts of the female genitalia in relation to orgasm during coitus. In his book, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1905), Freud argues that the transformation of women's 'erotogenic' zone from clitoris

to vagina is a manifestation of full sexual maturity (Davidson & Darling, 1989; Prozan, 1992). Many psychoanalysts have followed Freud's theory and have written extensively on the nature and differences between these orgasmic types. Often, anatomical and physiological explanations have been used to bolster these arguments (Levin, 1992).

Kinsey's, as well as Masters and Johnson's writings shatter the myth about vaginal orgasm and show that the vagina is a poor source of erotic arousal. As mentioned above, Masters and Johnson's writing on this subject has influenced many feminists in their belief in the power of clitoral orgasm to change female sexuality irrevocably.

Currently, the prevalent view in the literature is that clitoral stimulation is the primary source of sensory input for triggering orgasm (Mah & Binik, 2001). Approximately 80% of women indicate that they require additional clitoral stimulation during intercourse and only 12% consider vaginal stimulation more important than clitoral stimulation (Fisher, 1973). The debate regarding the existence of two types of orgasm continues and focuses on the difference between clitoral and coital orgasm. There are different viewpoints about the variables that influence the strength and degree of orgasm. It is suggested that clitoral orgasm is more localised, sharper and more physically satisfying, while coital orgasm is more of a 'whole-body' experience, deeper, longer lasting and more psychologically satisfying. (Mah & Binik, 2001).

1.3.4 Subjective versus objective definitions

The fourth unresolved debate in this field of research is the question of the subjective as opposed to the objective definition of orgasm. Reviewing contemporary literature on the experience of orgasm, Mah and Binik (2001) observe that there is a strong dichotomization between the biological and the psychological definition of orgasm, and that the accent is put on the biological 'objective' understanding of orgasm. This concept still subscribes to the school of thought of Masters and Johnson's (1966), arguing that orgasm can be objectively defined by physiological changes. Those who support this theory also claim that female orgasm should only be defined by vulval contractions (Davidson & Darling, 1989).

However, others criticise Masters and Johnson's definition, and by implication, those aspects of it that survive in the contemporary literature, as 'somatic reductionism'. They argue that orgasm is basically a sensation: a psychic phenomenon with somatic manifestations. Hence, a definition of orgasm in terms of physiological changes is as inappropriate as defining sadness by the presence or absence of tears (Alzate, 1985). Many studies illustrate cases of subjectively perceived orgasm without the 'necessary' vulval contractions (Clifford, 1978; Fisher, 1973; Levin, 1992). Moreover, as opposed to the physiological definition, some reason that psychological and social factors and, sexual symbolism influence the perceived orgasmic experience (Alzate, 1985; Davidson & Darling, 1989). They argue that the experience of orgasm receives its meaning from social factors and from cultural symbols that are identified with sexual activity. There are

some who define orgasm as an 'altered state of consciousness' (Davidson, 1980). Others suggest the combined approach, which defines orgasm as "a subjective event accompanied by a series of physiological changes" (Levin, 1992 p.26) or as a composite of an essential, psychic component and a set of somatic manifestations (Alzate, 1985).

Some argue that the confusion around the subjective versus the objective experience affects the debate around vaginal versus clitoral orgasm; if one regards orgasm as a psychic experience with peripheral phenomena that either elicit it or its materialization, then there cannot be vaginal or clitoral orgasm, but only psychic orgasm elicited by different sources (Alzate, 1985).

Indeed, the experiential dimension of orgasm is an under-researched field. This thesis explores the personal and subjective experience of the condition for women and the meanings they attach to it, within a particular social context, rather than defining orgasm or problems with orgasm in advance.

1.3.5 What is the contemporary role of orgasm?

Though few researchers explore the subjective experience of orgasm, some studies do examine the role that orgasm plays for women and its importance for them. These questions are looked at from two different angles: the relationship between reported orgasmic consistency and reported sexual satisfaction, and the importance of orgasm as reported by participants. Neither has yielded conclusive evidence regarding the meaning

of orgasm for women. The conclusions of the studies are irreconcilable and it seems that researchers' opinions are more in evidence than are the outcomes of the data analyses as explored below.

1.3.5.1 Relationship between orgasmic consistency and sexual satisfaction

Most studies on women found no correlation between orgasm consistency and having a satisfying sexual life. Bardwick (1971) observed that many women who had never experienced orgasm described their sex life as satisfactory. Fisher (1978) concluded that many wives with low orgasmic consistency rated sex as highly gratifying. Also Frank, Anderson and Rubinstein (1978) did not find a strong correlation between arousal or orgasmic dysfunction and sexual dissatisfaction. However, they found a more consistent relationship between sexual satisfaction and what they defined as 'sexual difficulties'- problems which were not dysfunctional in nature (e.g. the inability to relax).

Though these studies were conducted in the 1970s, Michael et al. (1994) corroborated them. The latter stated that only 29% of women reported always having orgasms while 75% of men reported this. However, the percentages of women and men who were extremely physically and emotionally satisfied with their sex lives were almost the same, at around 40%. They concluded that there was not a strong correlation between having orgasms and having a satisfying sexual life.

The studies mentioned above suggest that there is no correlation between orgasmic consistency and having a satisfying sexual life. However, two studies argue the reverse. Clifford (1978) found a significant relationship between orgasm consistency and frequency of satisfaction during intercourse and oral sex. This research also found that for women with low orgasm consistency, the most frequent source of dissatisfaction was the fear of not pleasing their partners. In Waterman and Chiauzzi's (1982) study, female orgasm inconsistency was significantly related to sexual dissatisfaction. However, pleasure ratings for different sexual activities, except intercourse, were higher (for both men and women) when the activity occurred without orgasm. They suggested that the explanation for their finding could be that people consider orgasm as a 'normal outcome' for intercourse yet not of other sexual activities

In summary, there are conflicting results regarding the relationship between orgasmic consistency and sexual satisfaction. Some studies suggest that there is no correlation between the two, others contradict these findings. However, this correlation seems to be related to social expectations that sexual intercourse will culminate in orgasm. These findings indicate that the importance of orgasm is related to women's social expectations and social understanding of sex in general and orgasm in particular. Thus, in order to fully understand the relationship between orgasm and sexual fulfilment there is a need to explore the social construction of sex and orgasm.

1.3.5.2 Rating the importance of orgasm

A second approach to studying the meaning of orgasm for women is to directly ask women about the importance of this experience for them. A number of studies look at this question, generally by way of questionnaires. Hite (1976) studied female sexuality in the USA by way of open-ended, anonymous questionnaires. She concluded that intimacy and orgasm are both very important to women. However, she pointed out that in sex with a partner, closeness is more important than orgasm, and that women usually get intimacy and orgasm in different ways: the first through sexual activity with a partner, and the second by masturbation.

In her study, there were three versions to the questionnaire and different questions concerning the importance of orgasm to women. In summary, the results of her research were that the percentage of women who said orgasm was important in sex with a partner was much smaller than those who said orgasm was generally important. She found that between 62.5% to 50% of the women said that orgasm was important to them in sex with a partner, while 87% of the women said that orgasm was generally important.

Hite, who has recently conducted a similar study in the UK, Australia and New Zealand (2000), found different results in these countries regarding the importance of orgasm during sex. Around 43% of the women in her studies said that having an orgasm during sex with a partner was important for them, while around 31% said that it was not

important. These findings were lower than those reported in her earlier study in the U.S.A.

'The Janus report on sexual behaviour' (Janus & Janus, 1993) was a nation-wide sex survey conducted in USA. They found that most men and women did not think of simultaneous orgasm as very important, and that most women regarded it as a male driven demand. In regard to orgasm in general, some women said they faked orgasm in order to appease the male partner, while others saw it as an unrealistic demand on a reflexive response over which they had no control. From the men's perspective, female orgasm was proof of their skill in bed. The authors stated that the importance of orgasm for men and women ranged from it being seen as the ultimate in sexual fulfilment to having very little importance, yet concluded that women viewed orgasm as important and men viewed it as crucial.

In the British national survey of sexual attitudes and lifestyle of the subsequent year (Wellings, Field, Johnson, & Wadsworth, 1994), it seemed that both male and female participants found orgasm to be less important than was observed in the Janus report. Participants were asked to agree or disagree with the statements 'sex without orgasm cannot be really satisfying for a man' and 'sex without orgasm cannot be really satisfying for a woman'. Both men and women viewed orgasm as more important for men than for women. In addition, slightly more men agreed with these statements than did women. The researchers also suggested that people do not tend to feel strongly on this subject as only a small minority strongly agree or disagree with these statements.

The attempt to draw conclusions from the existing data, regarding the importance of orgasm to women, is problematic for a couple of reasons: first, the three studies that explore this topic use different questions, which make it difficult to compare between them. Second, they are inconsistent in their results. The conclusion that can be drawn are that men find orgasm more important than women and that the importance of orgasm is related to the meaning that men and women attach to this experience and sex in general. These studies indicate the importance of exploring the social understanding of sex and orgasm and the meaning attached to these experiences.

1.4 Feminist approach to research on female orgasm

An alternative approach to understanding the role that orgasm plays for women and the meaning of the experience for them emerges from feminist literature. This approach, includes the theoretical work of Nicolson (1993) and Jackson and Scott (2001) and the empirical research of Potts (2000) and Nicolson and Burr (2003).

Nicolson (1993) critiques much of the existing sex research for failing to consider the social aspect of sexuality and sexual behaviour. She argues that it is impossible to study 'natural' or 'culture free' sexual behaviour. She introduces the concept of 'knowledge cycle of power', which describes how male discourse, disseminated by science and the media, dominates the social discourse of what is regarded as normal and healthy. According to her, sex research is dominated by male discourse, which positions orgasm through penetration as the 'norm'. This understanding of sex is transferred via the media

to lay people and becomes 'common sense'. 'Common sense' influences women's self-concepts and regulates sexual behaviour. It then informs sex research and produces more alleged scientifically objective knowledge:

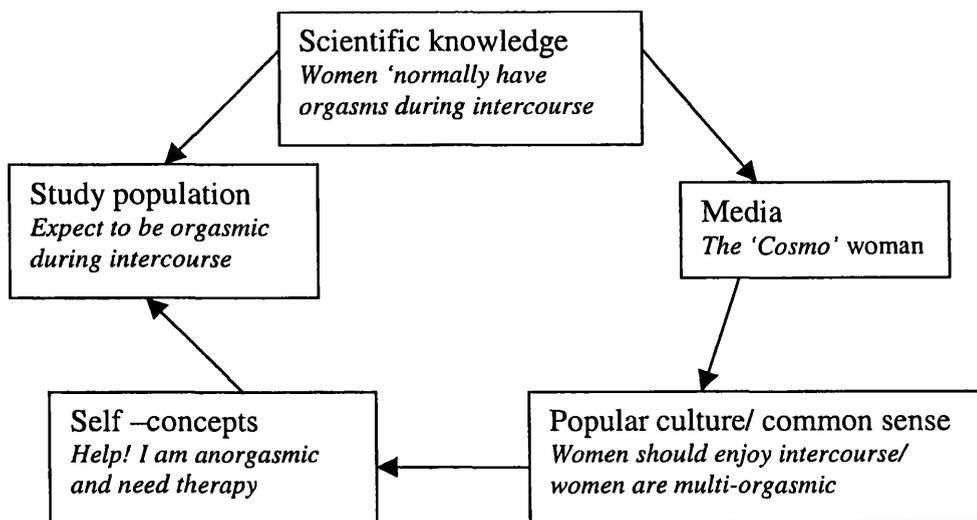


Figure 1.1: The knowledge cycle in respect of the female orgasm (Nicolson, 1993: 59)

Following Nicoslon's (1993) 'knowledge cycle of power', the critique of existing literature on female orgasm is that it works within the existing framework of the male construction of female sexuality discourse. Instead, it is necessary to study the social discourse which informs scientific research, the media and lay thinking.

Jackson and Scott (2001) take orgasm as a paradigmatic case to argue against biological and supra-social accounts of sexuality. They review the concepts of sexuality and sex that inform much of the contemporary sex research. They emphasise the importance of social context in sex research, but criticise the social constructionist research for being too abstract and neglecting bodies, material social relations and practices. They contend that

the existing literature on sexuality moves “between seeing meaning as inherent in bodies and meaning as floating free of bodies” (p. 105). They argue against the idea that bodily events are meaningful in themselves, and see such meanings as the product of social discourse and social practices.

When studying orgasm, one should consider both the conventional representation of orgasm in the public sphere, and the context of everyday sexual practices. As Jackson and Scott (2001) argue, sexual activity with a partner should be regarded as a social context in which two (or more) embodied social beings interact, each brings his/her cultural and biographical histories and social locations.

Two empirical studies analyse the contemporary discourse of female orgasm in lay talk. Potts (2000) explored the way men and women understand and talk about orgasm. Her research, conducted in New Zealand, included individual interviews and same-sex group discussions of women and men. She found that orgasm was positioned as the peak and the desired outcome of the sexual act, while the sexual act was described as a social convention of a specific sequence of events; a linear process that culminates in orgasm. Furthermore, her work established that there was a social imperative to orgasm as the ultimate goal of sex, which sometimes contradicted people’s feelings in relation to it, but which rendered it impossible for them to find other ways to refer to it. The position of orgasm as the ultimate goal of sex was prevalent even though many of the participants try to resist this position. The author argued that this is due to the difficulty of finding ways to talk about orgasm outside the prevailing paradigm.

Nicolson and Burr (2003) explored the discourses used in women's discussions of their experiences of sex and orgasm. They found that women were relatively indifferent about achieving orgasm through heterosexual intercourse for their own enjoyment. Rather, it was regarded as important for the sake of their male partners. They suggested that there was a relationship between popular beliefs about what is 'normal' and the way women perceive themselves to be dysfunctional or functional.

In summary, the empirical and theoretical papers outlined above shed light on the significance of the role that social discourse plays in women's experiences of presence and absence of orgasm. This discourse, which positions orgasm as the ultimate goal of sex, constructs the meaning of orgasm, the definition of sexual health and women's self-perceptions. However, the two empirical studies look only at lay representations of orgasm. According to Nicolson (1993), the media plays a significant role in the production and modification of these representations. Yet, no research has been done on the representations of orgasm in the media. This thesis addresses this gap.

1.5 Review of women's magazines portrayal of female sexuality

This section reviews the existing literature about the representation of female sexuality and femininity in women's magazines. It focus on women's magazines since this media type is considered to play an important role in shaping women's perception of womanhood and femininity (Ferguson, 1983; McRobbie, 1978, 1991; Winship, 1987)

and in constructing a collective female subjectivity (Ballaster, Beetham, Frazes & Hebron, 1991).

Women's magazines' portrayal of female sexuality and femininity has always been contradictory (Winship, 1987, Ballaster et al., 1991). Paradoxically, it presents 'natural' femininity as achievable only through hard labour. It also represents a tension between the importance of (heterosexual) relationships on the one hand and self-responsibility and pleasure on the other.

1.5.1 Relationship

The primary theme in British women's weeklies between 1949 to 1974 was the acquisition of men as a goal, and the importance of having 'true' love, relationships, and marriage in one's life (Ferguson, 1983). This idea continued to dominate women's magazines. The primary message of this medium was the centrality and desirability of men in all women's lives (Ballaster et al., 1991).

However, towards the 1980s there was a decline in the concept of romance (McRobbie, 1978, 1991). The theme of 'true' love and marriage and its importance in women's lives was reduced in the content of weeklies and became second to the notion of 'self-help', i.e. stressing the importance of self-determination in overcoming difficulties and the pursuit of perfection. Nevertheless, the importance of love and finding a man remained prominent as a means and a goal.

1.5.2 Self responsibility and pleasure

From the mid 1970s, women's magazines began stressing the self, self-image and self-satisfaction. The image of women in the media was one of acquiring greater independence and being more active (McRobbie, 1978, 1991). This was not a new theme, and according to Ferguson (1983), the main goal presented in women's weeklies from the 1950s to the 1980s was 'personal happiness'. Together with the stress on personal satisfaction, there was an increase in individualistic values. Hence, women were encouraged to take more responsibility over their lives, their personal happiness and their relationships. They were encouraged to overcome their problems through self-determination, and were challenged to pursue perfection:

“Learning to be a woman still involves teaching yourself to improve on your standards of femininity and achieve a better performance in all your womanly roles.” (Ferguson, 1983:99).

The notion of women's responsibility over their own lives and overcoming their difficulties was not a new one. Self control, as a value, has been most frequent and visible, particularly in the guise of duty and responsibility since the 1950s (Ferguson, 1983)

This concept of the 'independent woman' was even stronger in the pages of *Cosmopolitan*. It subscribed to an ideology of competitiveness and individual success (Winship, 1987). Yet, women's magazines, including *Cosmopolitan*, still relocated women within domestic and private frameworks; even those magazines that celebrated

the independence of woman ran regular features on cookery, parenting and such (Ballaster et al., 1991). Consequently, the tension between self and relationship was stronger than ever. The focus on individualism did not reduce the importance of relationships and true love in one's life.

1.5.3 Sexuality

In the 1950s and 1960s, the discussion of sex outside marriage was taboo. Women's weeklies stressed repression and denounced promiscuity. However, by the end of the 1960s, editors of British weeklies started experimenting with the expansion of the range of topics and opinions presented in their magazines. These experiments were successful and by the mid 1970s a new trend could be identified. One of these changes was a greater sexual explicitness.

Cosmopolitan was the flagship of this social shift, and was considered very radical at the time the magazine started. It stressed sexual pleasure as important and as a woman's right. Since then, Cosmopolitan and other glossy magazines have continued to discuss mainly heterosexual sex and have encouraged women to be sexually active (Ballaster et al. 1991). The magazines present sex as a means of discovering oneself, the centre of a relationship, something that can always be improved upon or be more varied. Paradoxically, it was also presented as potentially, always a problem, although talking about it was supposed to help solve this difficulty. In addition, sex became another area

for self-help and self-determination as women were encouraged to work both on their internal musculature and on their relationships (Winship, 1987).

Nearly all women's magazines shared the notion that a long-term relationship was the most fulfilling and appropriate context for sexual expression. Notwithstanding, the glossies more often discussed sex and sexuality outside the context of a stable relationship, and in the weeklies sexuality was mainly addressed in the 'problem-pages' (Ballaster et al., 1991).

As in other spheres, women were encouraged to be more assertive and take responsibility for their lives and their relationships. Yet the tension between self-centredness and men-centredness remained, and women were cautioned from being aggressive, as it was perceived that this may cause or contribute to male impotence. Hence, women were situated as responsible for both parties (Winship, 1987, Ballaster et al., 1991). The same tension between the importance of the self and of the relationship also presented itself in relation to sex and sexuality. Women were encouraged to work hard and achieve perfection in this sphere, but not at the expense of men's pleasure or their relationship stability.

1.6 Conclusion

Studies show that many women regard orgasm as problematic. The psychological research into 'Female orgasmic disorder' has focused mainly on the etiological aspects of

these experiences, yet without conclusive findings. No research has been done on women's subjective experiences of problems with orgasm and on the presentations of these experiences in the public sphere of the media. Little research has been done on the meaning of orgasm for women. The findings regarding the importance of orgasm are conflicting and it seems that there is no strong relationship between orgasmic consistency and sexual satisfaction.

The research domain is criticised for focusing on the physiological aspect of the female orgasm and failing to explore the social aspects of both orgasm and problems with it. A gap is recognised in the literature in terms of women's perception of female orgasm, its degree of importance to them, and the symbolic meaning associated with it. Potts's (2000) and Nicolson and Burr's (2003) research demonstrates that exploration of these issues must go beyond a one-dimensional model. In addition, Nicolson's (1993) and Jakscon and Scott's (2001) theoretical papers suggest that there is a need to explore the full range of meanings given to orgasm by women and by the media, and the relationship between personal experience and social representation. Orgasm should be regarded as an experience that derives its meaning from social discourse and socially embodied practices. By taking on board the suggestions of these researchers, this thesis aims to explore women's experiences regarding orgasm and problems with orgasm. It recognises the important role that social discourse and social practice play in women's experiences, and hence aims to investigate the way that social representation affects women and is constructed by the media.

1.7 Research Questions

Following from the literature review, this thesis aims to study the following questions:

1. How do women experience orgasm and problems with orgasm?
2. What are the social representations of female orgasm?
3. How are the social representations of female orgasm used in common-sense thinking and how do they influence women perception of their sexuality, their relationships and themselves?

Overview of Chapter Two

The chapter introduces the various components of the overall theoretical orientation that this thesis adopts. Both the Social Representations approach and the Embodiment standpoint are utilised as alternative theoretical standpoints to the traditional biomedical approach. The Social Representations approach is employed as it facilitates the exploration of both the subjective understanding of female orgasm and the media representation of this phenomenon. The embodiment standpoint centralises the social and the historical aspects of women's experiences without de-centralising the bodily aspects. The chapter explores each theoretical position and its utility for research on female orgasms and problems with them.

Chapter 2: Theoretical background

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Chapter 2: Theoretical background

2.1 Introduction

Chapter one presented the main literature on the presence and absence of orgasm. One of the key criticisms levelled at mainstream literature on the subject is that it disregards the social context of women's experiences. A limited biomedical perspective, which regards sexuality as a universal inborn drive, dominates psychological research on the subject (Tiefer, 1995). The chapter also established that professional and lay perspectives on orgasm in the western world have changed through history, influenced by scientific research, social changes and the media.

Hence, what is needed is a social psychology approach which acknowledges the social context of individuals' experiences and beliefs and explores the influence of scientific knowledge and the media on individuals' knowledge, and practice. Social Representation Approach (SRA) considers knowledge in relation to local, social, cultural and historical contexts. It explores how science, through social communication, turns into common sense and becomes part of individual thinking and practices (Moscovici, 2001). After establishing the changing meaning of female orgasm, it is clear that the research on female orgasm will benefit from an approach that is concerned with how the same social object acquires different meanings in different contexts and times. SRA is concerned with the symbolic function of the representational act and its power to construct what is real to a group of people (Jovchelovitch, 2001).

2.2 The Social Representations Approach

2.2.1 Why Social Representations Approach?

This thesis utilises the social representation approach for three main reasons:

2.2.1.1 SRA integrates media and lay thinking

Lyons (2000) argues for the importance of studying media representations for health psychology research. According to her, media representations produce and reproduce meanings concerning health and illness and mediate lived experiences of physical sensations and their subjectivities. Linguistic and visual representations are influential in constructing individual knowledge, beliefs and experiences of health and illness and also in limiting the framework within which they are understood. They create and maintain the dominant 'normative' reality for women and men by providing reference points for what it means to be a 'normal' human being' (Petersen, 1994 as quoted in Lyons, 2000).

Health psychology tends to undervalue the analyses of media representations of health, disease and illness (Lyons, 2000). Much of the existing social psychology research tends to ignore the content presented by the media and scientific research. Nevertheless, the literature review of this thesis confirms that scientific research and the media have played a key role in the representation of female orgasm during the past half century. SRA advocates the examination of representations in the media in order to study the shared beliefs that make up our social reality (Stockdale, 1995). It acknowledges that

representations are in people's minds as well as in the media and argues that it is necessary to study the representations of lay people and the media. Social construction and communication are the main concerns of SRA. Social representations (SRs) are socially constructed and used by individuals; they link the individual with the group on the one hand, and perception with action on the other hand (Lahlou, 2001). The emphasis in many SR studies is on communication and the embeddedness of SR in our cultural fabric. Many studies use a multilevel research approach, which aims at contextualizing SR into a sociohistorical framework and exploring the representations of a phenomenon at both the public and the individual level.

2.2.1.2 SRA focuses on social context

SRA is interested in how science turns into common sense and becomes part of our cultural heritage, our thinking and our daily practices. The very nature of sexual experience implies interaction between two or more people. Any interaction between individuals presupposes shared representations which enable them to name and classify the various aspects of their social reality. It is through those shared social representations that they make sense of the world and communicate that sense to each other. These representations allow individuals to construct a framework of references that facilitates their interpretations of reality and guides their relations to the world. Because representations are elaborated in the social sphere and evoked frequently, they become deeply embedded in the cultural fabric. Thus, the social representations approach is an appropriate approach to this study since it enables the researcher to contextualise

women's experiences and to look at shared expectations, knowledge, associations and motives (Bromnick & Swinburn, 2003).

2.2.1.3 SRA focuses on social changes

SRA contextualises health and illness in concrete circumstances. It argues that it is impossible to dissociate the biological aspect from the symbolic aspect and that it is impossible to explore the 'objective' aspect which is not influenced by the symbolic meaning of the phenomena (Moscovici, 2001). SRA refers to the fluid dynamic of modern societies; SRs are always changing and always 'in the making' (Jovchelovitch, 2001). The study of SR concentrates on topics which are new or changing and which lead to changes in a broader knowledge system. It acknowledges that these changes of knowledge occur differently in various social groups (Flick, 2000).

The focus of SRA on the changing perceptions of social phenomena is important in the research field of female orgasm. The literature review illustrated the changing professional and lay perception on female orgasm. It is important to contextualise women's experiences in their historical context.

2.2.2 What is the Social Representations Approach?

The Social Representations approach (SRA) is a social psychological framework which is used in many research domains to challenge traditional ways of thinking and as an

alternative to well established theories (Bergmann, 1998). However, this approach has not yet extended to include the domain of female sexuality and female orgasm. The SRA shares some common elements with social constructionism (McKinlay, Potter & Wetherell, 1993), in that it emphasises the social construction of everyday knowledge and the notion of ideas and images as forces that shape and constitute reality (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995). Nonetheless, the SRA differs from the social constructionist position as it is a less relativist approach, and in its concern with mental life. Unlike other social cognitive theories, the SRA focuses on the social and communicational nature of mental processing (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983).

The SRA explores the ways in which knowledge is represented in and communicated to society by focusing on common sense thinking and the transition of scientific knowledge to lay people through mass media (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983). The approach defines social representations (SRs) as the ideas, thoughts, images and knowledge which are shared by members of a certain group (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995). SRs originate, are generated by, and are modified through the social context and through social communication (Joffe, 1996).

The SRA does not distinguish between the social and the individual level of awareness (Laszelo, 1997) and argues that “socially based ideas...are deemed to be both exterior and interior to the individual” (Joffe, 1996:174). The approach assigns the individual with an active role in constructing and using social representations whilst at the same time highlighting the social aspects of those representations (Abric, 1996). This approach

therefore enables researchers to cultivate a deeper and wider understanding of female sexuality by taking into consideration the social as well as the individual level of its representation. Therefore, in order to understand how a certain phenomenon, such as orgasm, is constituted one should focus on the processes through and within which people make sense of it.

2.2.3 Defining Social Representations

SRs are regarded on two levels: as content and as a process (Laszelo, 1997). As content, they are the stock of common knowledge and information, both conceptual and pictorial, which people share in the form of 'common-sense' (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995). This shared element enables people to communicate with others in their social networks (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995; Duveen & Lloyd, 1993). Most SRs are derived from the world of science, and are communicated via the mass media (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983). The mass media interprets scientific data for lay people and modifies them into everyday language, making them part of 'common sense'.

SRs as a process are conceived as 'theories' for the discovery and organisation of reality (Moscovici 1973). This is the more constructionist component of SRA, which assumes an active role for the individual as well as the group in the reconstruction of reality (Abric, 1996). In this manner, the social function of the representational process is to help people interpret, give meaning to and understand their social worlds. "Meaning does not reside 'out in the world'; rather, the world of the individual is only meaningful to the extent that social representations give it meaning" (Mckinlay et al., 1993:135).

Like attribution theory, the SRA also refers to the basic need that people have to understand the world around them and give it meaning. However, whilst attribution theory emphasises the individual level and the cognitive nature of this process, the SRA emphasises the social and collective nature of explanations, and regards them as processes of communicating rather than of reasoning. Through communication, people generate representations, which are widely shared explanations of different social objects and events.

Two processes generate social representations: anchoring and objectification. These elements are not individual cognitive processes, but rather collective processes of assimilation. Therefore the notions, images and language shared groups help their members to come to terms with new and abstract ideas (Joffe, 1999). These processes explain the ways in which individuals and groups construct their reality. Anchoring is used when an individual or a group is faced with an unfamiliar event or concept. In such cases people turn to what they already know and understand. They impose similar past experience upon the new experiences. The use of the known phenomenon helps to convert the new event into a less threatening and a more easily understood notion, and forms an impression of the new phenomenon that is consistent with the existing idea (Joffe, 1996). Anchoring is the process by which current reality is constructed by the group's socio-historical notions, and by which a group sustains a stable reality even when experiencing major changes (Joffe, 1999).

Objectification refers to the human tendency to simplify information; it is the process by which abstract knowledge is transformed into concrete mental content. Objectification helps individuals grasp abstract notions, ideas and images, by means of saturating them with something more easily understood. Objectification is manifested when an abstract idea is constructed as a material phenomenon, or when a metaphorical image is used to represent a complex message. These images or symbols then become 'elements of reality' to the point that the image is fully assimilated and actually replaces the abstract notion (Moscovici, 1984). Moscovici's own work on the understanding of psychoanalytic concepts in lay thinking provides a good example of this process. In this example, abstract concepts such as ego and subconscious are constructed as physical entities. Objectification is the way contemporary cultural images construct the understanding of social events or objects.

2.2.4 Can Female orgasm be conceived as a social representation?

Literature does not offer a fixed 'check list' to define a social representation. Nonetheless, there are certain elements that must be present for thinking to be defined as 'social representation':

1. SRs are used by individuals as theories to understand and interpret the social world around them.
2. SRs are widely shared in certain milieus.
3. SRs manifest differently in different groups.

4. SRs originate in (often scientific) expert knowledge, and are transferred through the media, into lay 'knowledge' or common-sense.
5. SRs are shaped through past ideas (anchors) and current symbols (objectification).

Kruse and Schwarz (1992) argue that notions of sex and sexuality correspond to the requirements of the first three elements and should thus be included in the study of social representations. They are common sense knowledge and should be considered beyond individual cognition. Notions of sex differ from one social group to another, and can also be perceived as theories used to interpret the world. Hence, this approach should also be adopted in the study on female orgasm as a component of sexuality.

Many researchers have argued for the existence of certain notions of female orgasm as collectively shared by the members of society (Davidson & Moore, 1994; Gebhard, 1966; Heath, 1982; Laumann et al., 1994). "The word and the concept of orgasm are now part of our coding and of our representation (and realisation) of sexuality" (Heath, 1982:62). As shown in chapter one, currently orgasm is regarded as a socially desirable outcome of sexual intercourse (Laumann, Gagnon, & Robert, 1994) and a goal to reach (Darling & Davidson, 1986; Davidson & Moore, 1994; Gebhard, 1966). Failing to reach that goal reflects upon one's social definition (Heath, 1982). One may argue that this notion of orgasm is one that is widely shared, and in a sense is used to define people. Moffatt (1989) describes the contemporary view of orgasm in his research about undergraduate students in New Jersey in the mid-1980s:

Women also discuss sexual pleasure in the negative more often than men, noting their difficulties achieving it in required form under the new orthodoxy-orgasm

through intercourse... about half of them said they were still 'failing'. The other half reported qualified success (Moffatt (1989) in Nye, 1999: 421-422).

As such, the notion of orgasm corresponds to the first and second elements of SRs, i.e. that of being widely shared within certain milieus, and that of being used by individuals as a theory to understand and interpret the social world around them and their position within it.

As indicated in the previous chapter, the current view on female orgasm is influenced mostly by experts' thinking and historical events. During the 1960s the notion of female orgasm had been modified, primarily due to the works of Kinsey's and Masters and Johnson's, works which were disseminated beyond the academic world through the mass media. They have penetrated common sense thinking, changing the way in which women have been perceived; if previously women had been regarded as sexually different to men, they have then been considered as similar to men with regard to their orgasmic ability. Women have been encouraged to masturbate, please themselves and seek orgasms for their own pleasure (Lindner, 1994). This has brought about a shift in the common view of female orgasm. A line between orgasm and femininity was drawn, and the female orgasm has come to stand as a symbol for the new self-determined woman (Gerhard, 2000). Aware of the new knowledge regarding their orgasmic ability, women have then been expected to fulfil this ability.

This shift in the common view of female orgasm corresponds to the fourth and fifth elements of SR; they are derived from scientific knowledge, shaped by past ideas and

contemporary symbols and transferred through media. It can be argued that the notion of female orgasm was shaped by notions of male sexuality (anchoring) and by symbols of the new assertive woman, the so-called 'Cosmo girl' (objectification).

The different attitudes towards female orgasm, changing from being considered as unhealthy and immoral in the nineteenth century to being regarded as the desired goal of every sexual act, also proves that like the third element of SR, this notion is represented differently in different groups.

In summary, female orgasm should be included as part of Social Representations research as it corresponds to all five elements of SR. Research on female orgasm will gain by using SRA as it will enable the researcher to contextualise women's experiences and perceptions and to analyse the changing meanings of female orgasm in a multilevel study. SRA argues that the changing representations of a social phenomenon are not an external layer that can be removed in order to explore the objective biological truth about the phenomenon. Rather representations construct realities, organise them, prescribe what should or should not be accepted and produce concrete and real consequences in people's lives. However, SRA does not claim that the material world and our biological make up are not important. As Jovchelovitch (2001) argues, "we are both cultural and natural creatures and our cultural being is deeply intertwined with the sorts of bodies we have and the kind of world to which they belong" (p. 177).

However, SRA does not say much about our bodily existence. Like other social constructionist approaches, it overlooks women's and men's bodily experiences and neglects the implications of being a body. Like more traditional psychological approaches, social constructionism excludes the essentially embodied character of human endeavour (Sampson, 1998). Whilst trying to prove that reality is socially manufactured, social constructionist scholars reduce subjective experiences to the discursive resources people use when they construct meaning within the social context. Thus, they neglect the bodily aspects of people's sexual experience. In this sense, the SRA is similar to social constructionism in neglecting the role of the body.

Women's subjective sexual experiences arise at the point at which meaning meets matter (Lavie & Willig, *in press*). In other words, bodily experiences should be considered as a point of intersection between the biological, psychological and sociological worlds (Swan, 1997 Ussher, 1997). While SRA will be of much use to research on the presence and absence of female orgasm, there is also a need to utilise a theoretical standpoint that re-centres the experience of the body without de-centring the social, cultural and historical context.

2.3 The Embodiment standpoint

In recent years, a number of papers in critical social psychology has been published attempting to deal with questions about 'materiality' or 'the body', which appeared to be so frequently neglected within post-structuralist accounts (Gillies, Harden, Johnson,

Reavey, Strange, & Willig, 2004). For example, Ussher (1997) and Yardley (1997) propose a material discourse approach to the field of health psychology. These approaches attempt to 'bridge the gap' between the material and the discursive. However, it is argued that such approaches maintain the dualistic categories of mind/body and treat materiality as 'given' (Gillies et al, 2004). A different standpoint, which examines the centrality of embodiment to interpersonal relationships and psychological life, has been used in several studies (Radely, 1998). Such studies do not theorise the relationship between two separate entities. Rather, an attempt is made to explore the socially constructed nature of bodily processes and experiences from an embodiment standpoint – “where embodiment is viewed as always a total expression of both the discursive and non-discursive” (Gillies et al 2004; 100).

The emerging embodiment movement is a collection of ideas that rally against the psychologist tradition, a tradition that overlooks the body or dichotomises the body and mind. The embodiment standpoint is inspired by philosophers like Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty and Foucault (Featherstone & Turner, 1995). This literature encompasses ideas from diverse thinkers and includes studies in realms such as anthropology, sociology, cognitive psychology, health psychology and social psychology.

This new movement within social science has not yet established a defined theory or theoretical approach. However, some papers discuss a theoretical standpoint which guided their empirical research (e.g. Csordas, 1994; Gillies et al, 2004). I refer to this standpoint as 'the embodiment standpoint' and define it as encompassing three main

elements. The embodiment standpoint argues that society constructs discourse as well as bodily conduct, that individuals understand, experience and construct the world through embodiment as well as through discourse and that discourse is embodied.

2.3.1 Society constructs discourse and embodiment

Throughout the modern history of western thinking, it was almost taken for granted that the body was invariant across history and culture. In contrast, a few thinkers, from Nietzsche to recent French thinkers like Foucault and Bourdieu have argued that the body is the product of social constitution (Hoy, 1999). According to Bourdieu culture and social positioning shape the experiences and the expressions of the physical being, and thus are manifested in the body (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Bourdieu's theory illustrates the latter point through his key concept, the 'habitus' (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990). The habitus are socially acquired embodied systems of dispositions. They are cultural habitats, which become internalised in the form of dispositions to act, and thereby think and feel in certain ways, such as a disposition towards certain leisure activities or musical tastes. Bodily practices are the medium through which individuals integrate into social order (Haug, 1987). They are acquired through our acculturation into certain social groups, such as gender, nationality, family, peer group, and social class. There are different bodily practices associated with each of these groups, which serve as the 'ways of being' for a group. Each individual's habitus are a complex matrix of these different bodily practices. Through the habitus, people act

and react to their social positions. They internalise the social standards of body and bodily practice and reproduce social standards and social positioning.

Embodiment plays a central role in social life as it is the medium through which individuals display and communicate their belonging to a certain group (Radley, 1998). It is an important factor in the process of establishing one's social identity, including one's gendered social identity. Bartky (1990) suggests three categories of gender practice that produce the feminine body: 1. The feminine body's size and configuration. 2. Gestures, postures and movement of the feminine body. 3. The display of the feminine body. Hence, women and men implement different postures and conducts according to gender norms. For example, women fit into less space by way of their bodily posture and movements than men; they more often adopt 'closed' sitting positions: legs held together or crossed, hands folded together or beside the bodies (Vrugt & Luyerink, 2000). It is also argued that the cultural norms encumber women with impossible expectations regarding their body sizes and configuration. Hence, women subject themselves to an endless struggle to conform to social standards. Failing to conform with social standards brings about feelings of guilt and shame. While conforming gains women attention and appreciation, it however leaves them socially powerless, seen as obsessed with insignificant matters (Bartky, 1990). Men also subject themselves to social standards but to different ones that, arguably, carry more power.

The individual is not considered to be passive in the process of the construction of his or her reality and self-formation. It is through engagement with, and investment in the

subject position, that individual women and men succeed in reproducing the dominant cultural discourse whilst simultaneously standing at some distance from the categories of that discourse. For instance, women play a part in their construction as the object of men's desire; they are not only the objects of men's gaze; they have a subjective part in becoming that object (Haug, 1987).

2.3.2 Understanding and experiencing the world through embodiment

Embodiment is not only shaped by society, but is also a means to understand, experience and construct the world. One understands and experiences the world not only by discourse and mental process but through one's body. Merleau-Ponty's definition of the 'lived body' demonstrates this point. The lived body is used in contrast to the Cartesian body, which is seen as an object, a mechanism controlled by the mind. According to Merleau-Ponty (1962) the body is not an object but a subject that helps to constitute the world through experience. Individuals apprehend their world always and inevitably through their bodies. Their bodies are the means of knowing the world and experiencing the world. One cannot understand the meaning of objects and their forms, without referring to the bodily powers through which one engages oneself with them; one's senses, motility, language, desire. People do not only observe the world but live in it (Burr, 1999). This view stands in contrast to the discursive psychology interpretation that experience is constituted through language (Gillies, et al, 2004). Merleau-Ponty regards the body as a sentient and sensible entity, and emphasises the importance of the body as such; as the visible-seer, the audible-listener (Featherstone & Turner, 1995). Merleau

Ponty draws our attention to the way in which we inhabit the material world, we live in it and are not observers of it.

In light of Merleau-Ponty's ideas, Bourdieu outlines strong relations between people's social position, bodily practices and the world and self-representation. In addition he sees the habitus as constructing not only bodily practices, but also the perception of the world; the habitus are accountable not only for understanding oneself, but also for an understanding of the world.

Embodiment supporters follow Bourdieu's line of thought and add that experience is not an individual notion, but a flexible and a collective one. One's experience is in fact a two-way path, which involves particular circumstances of interaction and readings made by others (Moore, 1994). It is impossible to either detach one's impressions or one's body from the experience itself (Csordas, 1999). Experience is regarded as a form of embodied inter-subjectivity (Csordas, 1999; Moore, 1994). Indeed, the emphasis is not on the role the body plays in one's perception of the world, but on the comprehensive picture of the embodiment as a way of inhabiting the world (Csordas, 1999).

2.3.3 Discourse is embodied

Discourse and body should not be regarded separately since people live in a community, which is both linguistic and bodily (Sampson, 1998). The discursive dimension is physically manifested (Yardley, 1997). Discourse should be understood in its larger

meaning, i.e. not only including language but objects and practices as well (Haug, 1987; Ibanez, 1994). We communicate by our body, by touching, smiling, screaming, crying, by posture and gesture, by the way we walk, talk, sit, by what we eat, hear, see by the voices we do when we have sex.

As was explored in chapter one, Jackson and Scott (2001) argue the embodiment standpoint in regard to the research of female orgasm. They argue that the significance of orgasm is derived from its construction and reconstruction in a social context. They regard everyday sexual activity as a social reflexive process in which people construct both their experiences and themselves by manifesting and reworking gendered cultural understanding of sex. Thus, orgasm receives its meaning both from its conventional representation in the public sphere and from its construction and reconstruction in the more private sphere of sexual activity. Hence, following the embodiment standpoint the argument is that both discourse and social practice are socially constructed and together construct women's understandings and experiences of the female orgasm. Further, it is argued that discourse and bodily practices impinge upon subjectivity, self and identity. Following Jackson and Scott (2001) this thesis recognises women's experiences of presence and absence of orgasm as 'embodied'. That is to say, women's experiences are grounded in the materiality of the body and constructed in the social context of their everyday (every night) lives (Burr, 2002). Therefore, one should focus on the process through which and within which people constitute the experience of orgasm as an embodied experience (Lavie & Willig, *in press*).

The question that remains unanswered is the methodological one; how exactly does one study a subject using the embodiment standpoint? Little has been written about the empirical research methods used in the study of embodiment (Gillies *et al.*, 2004). Bordo (1998) encourages moving away from the abstract 'theory of the body' to embrace 'bodily practices'. However, she considers this tool as an auxiliary to the study of representations and discourses. Similarly, Csordas (1999) argues that embodiment studies should examine simultaneously representation, discourse and embodiment, yet acknowledges that no specific method or focus has been established yet. She draws attention to the body as the existential ground for culture; confirmation should be sought even in purely verbal data.

2.4 Conclusion

Research on the presence and absence of female orgasm will gain from a theoretical approach that contextualises women's experiences in their local, social, cultural and historical contexts. Such an approach should explore the influence of scientific research and the media on the changing meaning of the female orgasm.

Once scientific research and the mass media are recognised as playing a key role in the formation of women's conceptions of the presence and absence of orgasm, the theory of social representations becomes indispensable. The Social Representations approach facilitate a social rather than an individual understanding of women's construction of the

presence and absence of orgasm. This approach is concerned with the changing meanings of social objects and the process by which groups construct and maintain their worldview and identity. It enables the researcher to explore the feedback loop between social construction and individuals' thoughts and practices.

Unlike the social discourse approach that denies the notion of people as embodied beings (Radley, 1991), SRA acknowledges that the material world and our biological makeup are important. Yet SR studies, like other social psychologist approaches, tend to neglect these aspects of human experiences. In this chapter I have argued for the use of what I defined as the 'embodiment standpoint'. The embodiment standpoint argues for the centrality of the body as a site of social control and symbolic communication, but also as a subject through which one constitutes and understands the world. It is argued that individuals, who are embodied into a community which is both linguistic and bodily, use both discursive and non-discursive resources to construct the meaning of themselves and the world around them. In order to understand how the experiences of the presence and absence of orgasm are constructed, thus, one should focus on the discursive and non-discursive resources women use in the processes through and within which they compose such experiences.

Overview of Chapter Three

The chapter provides a rationale for the methodology, methods and samples used in the thesis. This rationale is based on its theoretical approach, and the empirical data that will be elucidated in subsequent chapters. This thesis triangulates methodologically and includes both a semi-structured interview based study and a media analysis. The chapter offers a detailed account of the steps taken to address the research questions in the interview-based study and the media analysis, and includes a description of the samples.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction – why a qualitative methodology.

Little is known about women's experiences of orgasm and problems with orgasm. Moreover, the social representation of female orgasm has not been studied. With little previous research available, a qualitative methodology is highly appropriate, as it enables one to explore the area without a-priori hypotheses.

The thesis's emphasis is on the subjective experience of women who have problems with orgasm. The study is concerned with women's personal representation of a phenomenon, rather than with an objective statement about the phenomenon. There is a growing consensus that qualitative methodology can be of greatest value in addressing issues of meaning (Daniluk, 1993; Davidson & Layder, 1994; Joffe, 1999b).

This study uses the Social Representation approach (SRA) as its theoretical framework. Literature on the SRA includes a wide range of methods and methodologies, as this theoretical concept is not tied to a particular empirical procedure (Augoustinos & Walker, 1995; Duveen & Llyod, 1993). The choice of methodology is crucial as some methodologies do not provide the right environment to facilitate the emergence of SRs. "Unfortunately, the richness of representation is not noticeable in the laboratory. Our experimental procedures seem often to force certain kinds of thinking or responding, and subjects tend to leave their culture at the door" (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983:118).

Thus, the SRA is often linked to qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups (Laszelo, 1997).

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Face-to-face Interviews

The issue of female orgasm is an intimate and personal matter, one which is not usually discussed openly and shared with other people, particularly strangers. Not surprisingly, some adults hold negative attitudes towards revealing their sexual behaviour to others (Dockrell & Joffe, 1992). In addition, questions about sexual dysfunction elicit moderate to high levels of discomfort (Catania McDermott, & Pollack, 1986). Thus, the question of choosing the appropriate method for this research is enormously challenging.

In the literature one finds both pros and cons for the use of face-to-face interviews (FTFI) in sex related studies. It has been shown that the refusal rate in FTFI compared to questionnaires is higher (Weiderman, 1999; Catania *et al.*, 1986). In addition, FTFI provides more visual social cues than questionnaires and telephone interviews; this increases the respondents' consciousness regarding what the interviewer is like as a person. This factor also increases the probability of respondents providing socially desirable responses. This is one form of self-presentation bias that influences measurement errors (Coxon, 1999; Wellings *et al.*, 1994).

Others hold a different standpoint regarding the use of interviews for exploring intimate issues. Parker, Herdt and Carballo (1991) argue that semi-structured interviews are fundamental for qualitative sex research. According to them, in-depth interviews can provide highly intimate and personal data through the trusting rapport which could and should be established between the researcher and the participant. Thus, the intimacy of the semi-structured interview can offer access to the more private sphere of the interviewee. The same social cues that might decrease the respondents' feeling of anonymity increase the credibility of the researcher and of the research. Moreover, it is suggested by Catania, McDermott, and Pollack (1990) that, as a rule, women feel more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Consequently, the credibility aspect as opposed to the privacy one is more significant when determining which research method is most suitable for women.

Semi-structured interviews provide an environment that facilitates better communication between interviewer and interviewees. The nature of the interview encourages interviewees to reveal with their own definitions, vocabularies and ways of thinking (Silverman, 1993) and thereby enables the researcher to abandon predefined assumptions and to 'discover' perspectives differently from those expected (Farr, 1982).

This thesis applies the following method: The semi-structured interview is followed by a questionnaire, which allows both interviewer and interviewee the opportunity to follow the interviewee's sequence of thought and to explore the subjective meaning and experience of the interviewee. The questionnaire allows the researcher to gain access to a

more structured and intimate quality of information, such as the frequency of orgasm and sexual intercourse. In fact, this information does not provide the final results of the study, yet it sheds light on some aspects of the experience.

3.2.2 Sampling

Volunteer bias is a problem for much social science research in general, and for sex research in particular. This factor makes it practically impossible to have a representative sample in this type of research. Catania et al.'s (1990) literature review explores the differences between volunteers and non-volunteers for sex studies. They find that the two groups differ in four aspects:

1. Personality characteristics: volunteers for sex research have higher self-esteem.
2. Demographic characteristics: more men volunteer for sex research than women.
3. Attitudes toward sex: in five out of six studies, volunteers for sex research are found to be less sexually inhibited and more sexually liberal, permissive and curious.
4. Sexual behaviour: in six out of eight studies, volunteers for sex research report higher rates of vaginal intercourse, masturbation, 'unusual' sexual experiences and exposure to erotic materials. It is unclear whether the difference is derived from the behaviour itself or from the way it is reported.

Supplementary to point number 2, Turner (1999) asserts that people in higher income brackets as well as older people are the most likely to refuse to participate in such studies.

However, since qualitative research has different objectives and goals to those of quantitative work, the concepts of representativeness and generalisation play a different role. Qualitative research does not aim to accurately and statistically measure the relationship between hypothetically related variables. It aims to explore in detail a small well-defined sample, and avoids generalisation that includes a wider population (Flowers, Graham & Marriott, 1999). Hence, qualitative work involves a shift from statistical analysis to a detailed and complex interpretation of socially located phenomena (Smith, 1995)

This research uses a theoretical sample carefully chosen to answer the different aspects of the research questions. The study design contains a matrix of 6 groups:

	Women who describe themselves as having problems with orgasm	Women who describe themselves as not having problems with orgasm
Youngest group (25-32 years old)	10 women	10 women
Middle group (48-55 years old)	10 women	10 women
Oldest group (60-67 years old)	5 women	5 women

Table 3.1: The study design

Human sexuality interacts with a variety of biological, psychological and social factors. Therefore, a lifelong examination of sexuality is an appropriate way of looking at the issue of orgasm. It has been suggested that when studying sexuality throughout the life span, one should observe three dimensions of time: historical time, social time, which refers to the social expectations that are internalised by the individuals in a given society, and life time, which refers to the chronological age (Sydow, 1996). One way to

review the historical dimensions is to use the concept of 'cohort'. Cohort means a group of people, defined by a year of birth, who share certain biographical experiences that in turn influence their life cycles (Sydow, 1996).

The division of the study sample by age takes into consideration these three dimensions of time. It is designed primarily to explore the effects of the feminist and sexual revolutions upon the social representation of female orgasm and women's private experience of their sexuality. This design contains three cohorts, participants whom have reached sexual maturity before, during and after the sexual revolution respectively. The 'oldest' age group was chosen to reflect upon the generation before the sexual revolution. The Annual Abstract of Statistics (1992) reports, that in 1977 64% per cent of women had got married at the age of 25 or younger. A woman who was 60 years old in 2001 was 27 in 1968, which means that there is a very high probability that she was already married during the sexual revolution in Britain, and thus less likely to be influenced by it in terms of her sexual development. Women from the middle group were between 15 to 20 years of age in 1968, and it is fair to postulate that they are the group most influenced by this historical and social change. Women from the 'youngest' group were born between the years 1971 and 1976, and thus grew up after the social changes prompted by the sexual revolution had occurred. This division by age, therefore, enables one to explore the experience of women whose sexual maturity had evolved before, during and after the sexual revolution.

This division not only looks at the social and historical time dimensions, but also at the life-time dimension. As the average age of menopause is 51.4 (Morokoff, 1988), the three groups are, approximately, pre, in between and post menopause. This facilitates a better understanding of the psychological aspects of the relationship between menopause and sexuality, an area of research which is under-researched (Morokoff, 1988). Moreover, according to national statistics, the current average age at which women get married in England and Wales is 31.55 (National Statistic, 1998). Therefore, the 'youngest' group provided an opportunity to explore mainly the experience of single women, whilst the other two groups provided an opportunity to explore the experience of mainly married, divorced and widowed women at other stages of life.

The second division is based upon the subjective definition of the participants. The sample is divided into two groups; women who have problems with orgasm and those who do not. The subjective definition of orgasmic status, as asserted by the women, has recently drawn more attention and has been awarded with a more important status (Schover, 1996). However, it has not yet received enough empirical attention and has not played a significant role as a guideline for research (Birnbau-Lichtenstein, 1998).

3.2.4 Procedure of the interviews

University Ethics Committee approval for this study was sought and obtained. The majority of the participants were recruited through advertisements placed in national newspapers, local newspapers and women's magazines, and in various clinics, hospitals,

universities and sports centres. The advertisements sought volunteers for a research project concerning relationships and sexuality or sexual problems. The advertisement included the restricting requirements of the sample design; to be of a certain age and to have been born in the United Kingdom. The latter requirement had risen from the need to define a specific social group. A minority of the interviewees was recruited by 'word of mouth'; either through the recommendation of another interviewee, or through personal contact. Most of the participants initiated the first contact, after which a meeting was arranged by either telephone or email. During this initial contact, the researcher provided the callers with general information about the aim of the research and the procedure involved, guaranteeing them full confidentiality. It seemed inappropriate to bring up the specific topic, experiences around orgasm, at this stage, as it felt too intimate a subject for such a non-intimate communication. However, in the last stages of the process, where a small specific number of women were still needed for the research, more information was given in the initial communication.

Most women were interviewed in the Psychology department at the university; a few were interviewed in their own homes. On average, each meeting, which included the interview and the questionnaire, lasted for approximately one hour. The interview was based on a general interview schedule, and consisted of open-end questions (see appendix 1). Prior to the start of the interview, the interviewee received an information sheet that included general information about the aim of the research and the procedure of the interview. Interviewees were assured of total confidentiality, and were asked to sign a consent form.

At the beginning of each interview, the interviewee was presented with five pictures and asked to say what came to mind when she looked at them. The pictures were presented in a specific order: The first picture was of a kiss on the cheek, the last of a man and a woman half-naked, engaged in a sexual act. The purpose of the pictures was to 'break the ice'; to create the appropriate ambience necessary to initiate communication about sexual issues.

Following the discussion about the pictures, the women were asked general questions about sex and questions about the social representation of orgasm. The interview would then move to a more personal sphere of experience, starting with a question about the past with the intention of encouraging the interviewee to talk about both her past and her present experience of orgasm and problems with orgasm. The interview terminated with a general question about women's sexuality, to encourage a more general discussion on the subject and to move away from the discussion of the participant's private experience of orgasm and problems with orgasm. When the interview ended, the women were asked to fill in a questionnaire (see appendix 2). The questionnaire contained 23 questions regarding demographic characteristics, relationships, sexual behaviour, frequency of orgasm and attitudes toward orgasm. After having completed the questionnaire, women were encouraged to ask questions and were given the opportunity to receive the research results once they were obtained.

3.2.3 Statistical description of the sample

Approximately 86% of the interviewees have an academic degree or professional equivalent (see appendix 3 for summery of information of participants). Of the interviewees 82% are white, 8% are black, 2% are Asian and 8% are of other ethnic origin. The age range of the sample is between 25 and 65, with a mean age of 44.62. In the ‘youngest age group’ women are 25 to 32 years old (mean age 28.85); in the ‘middle age group’ women are 48 to 55 years old (mean age 51.4); and in the oldest age group women are 60 to 67 years old (mean age 62.6).

A majority of the interviewees (68%) had a partner at the time of the interview. Most interviewees (64%) reported having had only heterosexual sexual activity; 32% had mainly heterosexual sexual activity and at least one experience of homosexual sexual activity; 2% had both heterosexual and homosexual sexual activity; 2% had mainly homosexual sexual activity.

A majority of the interviewees masturbate (74%). The highest rate of masturbation was in the ‘no-problems’ group and in the ‘youngest’ age group. The percentage of women who masturbate according to the sample groups is presented in the following table:

	‘Youngest’	‘Middle’	‘Oldest’		‘Problems’	‘No problems’
Masturbate	90%	75%	40%		68%	80%
Do not masturbate	10%	25%	60%		32%	20%

Table 3.2: Percentage of women who masturbate according to the sample groups

The interviewees were asked to report the frequency of orgasm during masturbation, penetration and sexual activity with a partner. Most interviewees who masturbate experience orgasm most of the time that they engaged in the activity (83.78% of the interviewees who masturbate reported frequency of orgasm during masturbation to be higher than 50%). Most of the interviewees do not experience orgasm during penetration most of the time (70% of the interviewees reported frequency of orgasm during penetration to be less than 50%), yet most of them did experience orgasm during sexual activity with a partner most of the time (63.3% of the interviewees reported frequency of orgasm during sexual activity with a partner to be higher than 50%).

There were no marked differences between age groups in relation to the frequency of orgasm during penetration or during sexual activity with a partner. Interviewees from the ‘no problems’ group reported higher frequency of orgasm during penetration and sexual activity with a partner than those from the ‘problems’ group. The following table presents frequencies of orgasm during masturbation, penetration and sexual activity with a partner according to group division:

Masturbation		‘Youngest’	‘Middle’	‘Oldest’	‘Problems’	‘No problems’
	Never	0	5%	0	0	4%
0-50%	10%	10%	10%	20%	0	
51-100%	80%	60%	30%	48%	76%	
Penetration	Never	40%	40%	40%	48%	32%
	0-50%	30%	35%	20%	32%	28%
	51-100%	30%	25%	40%	20%	40%
Sexual activity	Never	0	15%	20%	16%	4%
	0-50%	30%	25%	20%	36%	16%
	51-100%	70%	60%	60%	48%	80%

Table3.3: Frequency of orgasm during masturbation, penetration and sexual activity with a partner according to groups

3.2.5 Procedure for interview transcript used in the research

The interviews were tape-recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The transcript notation used is shown in appendix 4. The names of all the participants have been changed and names of people they refer to have been removed to ensure confidentiality.

3.2.6 Method of data analysis

This research uses a systematic content and thematic analysis (see Joffe & Yardley, 2003) to analyse the themes that pervade the women's interviews. The aim is to tap a less artificial, more ecologically valid set of themes than could be accessed by closed questions in surveys and scales. At the same time, a systematic analysis of such content allowed the researcher to ascertain the spread of ideas across the sample, revealing whether themes are widespread or more idiosyncratic. The typicality of a theme, even in a non-representative sample, provides an indication of the degree to which it is shared in the sample or in sub-groups thereof. However, in the approach adopted, typicality is reported but not reified. There is recognition that a series of forces may prevent participants from expressing all of their thoughts, images and feelings regarding the subject (Joffe and Yardley, 2003).

Themes are labels that capture the essential quality of what the participant discussed with the interviewer. However, the theoretical background of the research and the research questions also influence the themes. Every transcript is a document that can be analyzed for many different purposes and in many different ways. In a sense, the research question

provides the frame of the analysis whilst the data provides the picture within the frame. In other words, although the themes are inductive in that they are drawn from the data, the existing literature and the theoretical framework informs how the researcher approaches the data.

3.2.7 Procedure for coding

The first step in the process of coding the interviews was to create a coding frame. According to Bauer (2000), a coding frame is constituted by the questions the researcher asks of the data. Hence, the analysis of the data can only produce answers to these questions. It is therefore important that codes are derived theoretically and reflect the purpose of the research.

A preliminary coding frame was drawn up from an explorative and 'open' stage, in which the researcher closely read the interviews and looked for codes in the interviews themselves. This reflective process involved staying close to the data and the theoretical aims of the research simultaneously. It was important to define the codes in such a way that they would be well operationalised without over-lapping.

This initial textual level identified a long list of codes. These were then integrated into conceptual categories by way of linking and splicing (Dey, 1993). 'Linking' clusters multiple codes into groups. This created high-order themes which allowed a higher order of abstraction and interpretation while at the same time keeping finer coding

discriminations. For example, the codes 'Transcend experience', 'Transcend experience-reverse' and 'out of control' were clustered under the group title 'Mystical experience'. Splicing is when cluster codes are used to create a new, more general theme. In this process 'old' codes are erased and replaced with new ones, while, in linking, old codes are kept and a higher-order code is created. For example, initially there were different themes for feelings such as worried, stressed and relaxed. After applying the method of splicing, the themes were more general themes, such as 'positive emotions' and 'negative emotions', all clustered under the group title of emotions.

After the construction of the coding frame, the computer software ATLAS was used to attach the codes from the coding frame to segments of interviews. The coding frame was piloted on half of the interviews. A final coding frame was then drawn up and was used to code all the interviews. An independent coder coded 10% of the interviews, for the purpose to inter-rater reliability testing. In 85% of cases the same code was chosen for a given segment of text.

3.2.8 Procedure for analysis

The use of ATLAS facilitated the examination of the data from a variety of perspectives. Moreover, it enabled the retrieval of all the segments that shared the same code and the assessment of how many people per group shared a specific code or a group of codes.

This stage of analysis and writing up was a circular process which oscillated between macrostructure and the more specific microstructure (Silverman, 2000). In this process the codes were explored on a quantitative level using ATLAS as well as on a qualitative level. The quantitative or frequency data was used as an indication of the communality of a theme within the sample or a sub section thereof. The content of this widespread thinking was the focus of a thematic analysis in which excerpts of texts that have been coded under particular themes were gathered and explored.

3.3 Media analysis

Social representations (SRs) are positioned at the intersection between the individual and society (Jovchelovitch, 1996), and as such are embodied in the communication and the individual minds (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999; Joffe 2002). As explored in chapter two, the SRA explores the ways in which knowledge is represented in and communicated to society by focusing on common sense thinking and the transition of knowledge through the mass media (Moscovici & Hewstone, 1983).

This important element of the Social Representations approach calls for a triangulation approach. Triangulation is a combination of methods used when examining a phenomenon. The triangulation approach enables the researcher to explore a number of modes together. Whilst interviews and questionnaires explore individual cognition, media content analysis explore formal communication. This approach follows the approach of Moscovici's first piece of research using the SRA, one which combined data from social

surveys with data from media analysis (Moscovici, 1961), and which is central for the study of social representation (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999). In the past, triangulation was used as a strategy for the validation of results. A more contemporary utilization by many researchers however, is to enrich the research and explore different aspects of the same topic. The purpose has changed from validating results to extending the scope and the depth of the results (Flick, 1992).

When using media content analysis together with individual interviews, the social nature of women's experiences emerges. This triangulation enables the researcher to avoid individualisation of the subject of female orgasm, as it allows the researcher to see the wider picture and thus to understand the broader context of the social milieu of the interviewees. Rather than focusing solely on the individual understanding, the research hence focuses on group-based representations of sexuality and on the messages transmitted from that social milieu.

According to Giddens (1991), information and ideas presented in the media reflect and contribute to shaping the social world. Similarly, this thesis argues that mass media contributes to shaping women's thinking and at the same time it is being shaped by women. The mass media circulates knowledge and cultivate the symbolic environment. Consequently, it plays an important role in enabling and constraining the content of other modes such as individual thinking (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999).

3.3.1 Sample design

The choice of women's magazines for the media content analysis was influenced by data gathered from the interviews and from literature review. Women's magazines were the most cited source of information by the interviewees (see chapter 5). In addition, many researchers identify the important role that women's magazines play in shaping women's perception of womanhood and femininity (Ferguson, 1983; McRobbie, 1978, 1991; Winship, 1987) and in constructing a collective female subjectivity (Ballaster, Beetham, Frazes & Hebron, 1991). Moreover, some argue that newspapers and magazines reflect social changes more accurately than any other medium (Demarest and Garner, 1992). Thus, women's magazines may be the most suitable medium for representing the contemporary perception of female orgasm.

The media content analysis follows the same approach applied in the sample design of the interviews. One aim of the media analysis was to explore the social representation of orgasm before, during and after the sexual revolution. The choice of magazines and the time frame of the analysis were informed by this approach. The choice of magazines was also influenced by both literature and data retrieved from the interviews. Amongst the magazines, 'Cosmopolitan' was most commonly cited. Many interviewees specifically mentioned it as an important factor in the construction of the social representation of female orgasm. Women from the 'oldest' and 'middle' age groups defined Cosmopolitan as a pioneer, in that it was first to encourage open discussion about sexual matters. Some women from the 'middle' age group accentuated the important role it had played at the beginning of their sexual awareness. Literature also supports the image of

'Cosmopolitan' as a contributor to the change in sexual attitudes of the 1970s (Winship, 1987). Finally, 'Cosmopolitan' was one of the best selling monthlies in Britain during the 1970s and early 1980's (Winship, 1987).

A second magazine was chosen as a counter-example to 'Cosmopolitan'; one which was popular, but addressed a different social segmentation. A weekly was chosen to fulfil this role since weeklies in Britain address a different social segmentation than that of magazines similar to 'Cosmopolitan', in two respects: A different social class and a different age group. 'Cosmopolitan' is considered to appeal to a more up-market audience. It is also designed for a younger audience than that of the popular weeklies (Ferguson, 1983). Consequently, 'Woman's Weekly' was chosen, since it was one of the most widely read women's magazine in Britain between the 1950s and the 1980s. This magazine also existed for some considerable period before 'Cosmopolitan'. As such, it provided access to the available sources of information that the 'oldest' age group had at the beginning of their sexual awareness. The choice of these two popular and very different magazines facilitated a comparison between two social segments.

3.3.2 Procedure of sampling

30 years of 'Cosmopolitan' were analysed, starting with its first issue, which was published in Britain in 1972. The sample consisted of 60 issues, two issues per year over 30 years, randomly chosen.

The 'Woman's Weekly' analysis started in 1960. This starting point was chosen after a review of a sample of the magazine from 1950 which showed that the concept of orgasm had not appeared at that time. Hence, 1960 was chosen as the earliest realistic starting point for analysing the coverage of female orgasm in this magazine.

After having read 10% of the sample, it became obvious that 'Woman's Weekly' includes reference to sexual topics only in its romantic fictional sections and problem pages. Romantic stories mainly referred to kisses, and there was no explicit description of sexual activity or any reference to female orgasm. The only place in which it appeared was within the problem pages, and even so only very rarely. Therefore, and in order to allow for the collection of a reasonable quantity of data, the analysis focused solely on the problems pages. All the problems pages in the forty years period were reviewed. In common with the method of work used with 'Cosmopolitan', all references to female orgasm were analysed.

3.3.3 Procedure of media coding

The construction of a coding frame for the analysis of the data extracted from both 'Cosmopolitan' and 'Woman's Weekly' was widely based upon the coding frame of the interviews. This was done in order to address one of the specific goals of this thesis, which is to explore the relationship between women's SR and media's SR. However, the list of codes of the media analysis was much shorter than that for the interviews, as there was only one objective of the media analysis; to examine social representations, as

compared to two objectives to the interviews study, which also included the exploration of the subjective experiences. Thus the media analysis required a shorter, less detailed coding frame. The analysis of 'Woman's Weekly' was restricted to articles which explicitly cited the words 'orgasm' or 'climax' and disregard articles which implied or vaguely referred to orgasm, in order to avoid misinterpretation.

The initial coding frame was piloted on a sample of texts extracted from both magazines. Based on this pilot, the coding frame was modified where necessary. The definitive coding frame was applied to analyse the data. The computer software ATLAS could not be utilised in this analysis due to practical restrictions. An independent coder coded 10% of the interviews, for the purpose to inter-rater reliability testing. In 84.65% of cases the same code was chosen for a given segment of text.

3.3.4 Procedure for analysis

The procedure applied for the analysis of the data extracted from the media was similar to the analysis of the data drawn from the interviews. In this process the codes were explored on a quantitative and a qualitative level and their interrelation was analysed. In addition, differences and similarities between the magazines and within the magazines were identified.

Different historical segments had become apparent throughout the analysis, which indicated the possible changing nature of the social representation of orgasm. The cover

of female orgasm in the 'Cosmopolitan' could be divided into three periods: 1972- 1983, 1984-1993 and 1994-2001. Similarly, two periods were identified in 'Woman's Weekly' cover of the subject (see chapter 4 for analysis of these periods).

Finally, a comparison was made between the interview analysis and the media analysis and similarities and differences in the construction of SR were explored.

3.4 Conclusion

The thesis uses a qualitative methodology because it explores an under-researched area and aims to establish a multi-dimensional understanding of women's subjective experiences and women's social representations of female orgasm. SRs are embodied in both communications and individual minds (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999). This important element of the Social Representations approach informed the triangulation approach that was applied in this thesis. In order to explore women's subjective experiences of presence and absence of orgasm semi-structured interviews were conducted with 50 women. In order to explore the social context of women's experiences media analysis was utilized.

This chapter provides a detailed methodological overview of the interview-based study and of the media analysis. A discussion of the limitation of the research is provided in chapter 8. For conceptual reasons the media analysis study is presented prior to the interviews based study. The results of the media analysis are reported in chapter 4. The

results of the interview-based study are explored in chapters 5, 6 and 7. The comparison between both studies is developed in chapter 8.

Overview of Chapter Four

The chapter presents the media analysis of 'Cosmopolitan' and 'Woman's Weekly'. It explores how orgasm is represented in each of the magazines over a substantial period of time. It finds very positive representations of orgasm as both a physical and an emotional experience in both magazines, which position the female orgasm as a woman's right, and also emphasises its importance to the partners. In addition, it shows that female orgasm, mutual orgasm and multiple orgasms are presented as common experiences as well as a goal to reach. It establishes that although both magazines acknowledge the high percentage of women who have problems with orgasm, both attach notions of blame and stigmatisation to these same women. The chapter concludes that the positive representations of orgasm seem to have increased over the years whilst discussions concerning experiences of problems with orgasm seem to have decreased.

CHAPTER 4: MEDIA ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

The chapter presents the results of the content analysis of 'Cosmopolitan' magazine (1972-2001) and 'Woman's Weekly' magazine (1960-2001). First, the chapter identifies trends within each magazine, as well as similarities and differences between the representations presented in both. Second, following the similarities identified in the analysis of the magazines' representations, it distinguishes and defines the social representation of orgasm in both magazines. The chapter uses more extracts from the Cosmopolitan. This is derived from the fact that the Cosmopolitan has more frequent discussions on the subject within its pages.

4.2 General description of the analysis of Cosmopolitan and Woman's Weekly: Similarities and differences

4.2.1 Cosmopolitan

It is possible to identify three periods in Cosmopolitan's coverage of the phenomenon of orgasm: 1972-1983, 1984-1993 and 1994-2001. These periods differ in the frequency of the publications of the phenomenon of orgasm as a whole. During the first and last periods, orgasm was mentioned in almost all the analysed issues (95%) in features about orgasm or other sexual topics, in problems pages, in personal columns and in letters from

readers. In the intermediate period (1984-1993) however, orgasm was mentioned far less frequently; only half of the issues analysed included anything at all on the subject of female orgasm. The first period (1972-1983) was the period in which the subject of problems with orgasm appeared most often; there were twice as many appearances than in the subsequent two periods put together. Over the years there were many discussions of the reasons behind the phenomenon, and of ways to increase the frequency of women's orgasms. However, discussions of the meaning of the problems and their consequences were mainly presented in the first period.

4.2.2 Woman's Weekly

In Woman's Weekly, orgasm was referred to as a 'climax' for the first time in a problem page in 1971. The word 'orgasm' itself was first used in 1976. The writing in the problems pages of Woman's Weekly changed in 1993 both in the quantity of letters concerning orgasm and in the response to such letters. This coincided with the departure of the magazine's longstanding Agony Aunt. In the years 1971-1992, there were only ten letters regarding the female orgasm or climax, whereas in the much shorter period between 1993 and 2001 there were 17 letters referring directly to the subject.

In addition, there was a substantial difference between the two periods in terms of the representations of orgasm and problems with orgasm. The first difference lies in the representation of female orgasm and its importance. In the earlier period women's orgasm was mainly depicted as important to their partners. The idea of orgasm as the

main goal of sex was challenged and the contemporary social atmosphere was criticized for placing too much emphasis on orgasm. During the later period, the magazine inclined towards a more positive and diverse representation of orgasm. Orgasm was depicted mainly as an experience of extreme pleasure and satisfaction, though the representation of women's orgasm as important to their partners was maintained. The second difference lies in the frequency of publications: In the later period, discussions of the experience of problems with orgasm declined. There was a discussion on how to enhance the frequency of one's orgasm but very little discussion on the experience of problems with orgasm. The third difference derives from the explanations for presence and absence of orgasm. In this respect, the Agony Aunt who wrote in *Woman's Weekly* during the earlier period, mainly discussed issues concerning one's relationship. The Agony Aunt who wrote in *Woman's Weekly* during the later period, explained presence of orgasm in terms of women's emotions, sexual practice and knowledge. It is difficult to discern whether the two Agony Aunts differed merely in their private thinking or, more likely, whether the two zeitgeist different in the two periods each was a product of her times.

The main similarity between the two periods was the manifold references to marital therapy and expert books. The earlier Agony Aunt concluded every letter with suggestions to make contact, if deemed necessary, with a counsellor, and with references to special books on the subject. This theme was somewhat less prevalent in the later period, but still dominant to some degree.

4.2.3 Comparison between magazines

The main difference between the two magazines was one of quantity. *Cosmopolitan* discussed orgasm at least every other month, in its features pages, columns and problem pages. *Woman's Weekly* discussed the topic only in its problems pages and it never appeared in more than 8% of the weeks in any given year.

On the whole, representations of orgasm and problems with orgasm were very similar in both magazines. That said, the later period of *Woman's Weekly* was more similar to *Cosmopolitan* than the first period. This similarity was mainly in representing orgasm as a highly valuable experience and in encouraging women to take responsibility and control over their orgasms, presenting orgasm as 'every woman's right'.

Another similarity between the two magazines was the changes in emphasis that evolved between the 1970s and the 1990s. It was not a case of a different representation but rather a different emphasis within the same representation. In both magazines the coverage of the phenomenon of problems with orgasm declined. More information was made available about achieving more orgasms, and less attention was given to explaining the absence of orgasm and discussing women's problems with orgasm. In addition, the association between the presence and absence of orgasm and women's activity and knowledge of their bodies became more prevalent over time (see appendix 5).

4.3 Social representation of female orgasm in *Cosmopolitan* and *Woman's Weekly*

4.3.1 Orgasm as a valuable experience

The most common theme in *Cosmopolitan* (see appendix 5) was that of orgasm as a valuable experience, that is to say, the added value of orgasm. This theme included the representations of orgasm as an extreme, normal, healthy and natural experience, and as a woman's right. The theme of orgasm as a valuable experience became more widespread over time. The following quote, which was given in a feature about women's descriptions of orgasm, was a typical example of orgasm as an extremely positive experience:

I thought that I was going to die there and then, because that was what life was all about and there wasn't much else to touch beyond it (*Cosmopolitan*, 1972).

In this quote orgasm is defined as something beyond an ordinary, day-to-day experience. It is not just another experience in life, but rather *the* experience in life, the meaning of life. Orgasm was not always defined in such an extreme fashion, yet there was an underlying assumption that orgasm was beyond the ordinary, day-to-day experience. The earlier *Agony Aunt* of *Woman's Weekly* reflected a similar perception of orgasm as an extremely positive experience. In one of her replies to a reader's concern about not experiencing orgasm she said:

People don't always achieve perfect physical harmony immediately (Woman's Weekly, 1971).

Naming orgasm the 'perfect physical harmony' implies a taken for granted understanding of orgasm as an ideal experience on both the physical and relational levels. Thus, even where the aim of the writer was to reassure the reader, the image of orgasm as something special and ideal was maintained.

Female orgasm was depicted as both a biological necessity and a social right:

Because undoubtedly orgasm is biologically necessary and as much the right of women as of men (Cosmopolitan, 1972).

This extract links biological necessity to social equality. Orgasm as a biological necessity serves as a ground for the demand for equality between men and women. This demonstrates the importance of both the biological aspect and the comparison between men and women in the social representation of female orgasm. Orgasm was presented as a natural experience both on physical and emotional level. This representation was the ground for women's right and duty to experience orgasm:

Being orgasmic is a natural response to physical and emotional triggers and there's no reason why you shouldn't learn them whatever your age (Woman's Weekly 1993).

This extract is an example of the contradiction inherent in the way orgasm was depicted; both natural and learned. The representations of orgasm as natural on both the physical and the emotional levels were manipulated to encourage women to aim for this goal. It seems that a shadow definition of this contradiction is that a woman has to overcome social barriers in order to reach her true self. Orgasm was natural for women yet was inhibited by social inequality. This assumption portrayed orgasm as related to the core of one's true self on both the physical and the emotional levels. This idea was evident in the following extract:

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).

Thus, orgasm was a way of expression of the true self, which connected the body and the soul. It was natural but at the same time, something which had to be demanded, an aim, an activity and a symbol of women's assertiveness and control.

In addition, it was also regarded as a healthy experience which had both immediate and lasting beneficial effects on the physical and the emotional levels. For example:

It is possible for women to orgasm regularly and we are biologically built to do so. Although women do conceive without having an orgasm, recent research from Hammersmith Hospital, London, indicates that the uterine contractions during orgasm may greatly increase a woman's chance of becoming pregnant (Cosmopolitan, 1997).

The image of orgasm as natural is strengthened by an additional value given to it; that of women's reproductive role. An additional added value for orgasm was related to one's mental health; It was a means of relaxing and of increasing the quality of one's sleep:

Rid yourself of the idea, sex is a marathon and realise in just 10 minutes you could both have had a fantastic orgasm. And nothing leads to more satisfying, refreshing sleep than that... (Cosmopolitan, 1999).

Here, the writer attaches a strong goal-oriented metaphor to orgasm: orgasm as a marathon. Indeed, orgasm was commonly referred to as the goal and as the end-point of the sexual encounter. The following extract echoes the metaphor of sex as a marathon and orgasm as its finish line:

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

4.3.2 The be-all-and-end all debate

Orgasm was regarded as the be-all-and-end-all of the sexual act, the ultimate goal of a mutual effort:

The Ultimate fulfilment of all sexual acts is the release of increased tension through orgasm (Cosmopolitan, 1972).

As the ultimate sexual fulfilment it was worth working towards, and indeed, it needed work, efforts and techniques. Women's magazines embraced this notion and filled in the role as a provider of these tools. The following extract was taken from the issue that marked Cosmopolitan's twenty-fifth anniversary:

In August 92 Cosmo introduced the CAT or Coital-Alignment-Technique- which fans swore 'virtually guarantees an orgasm'. As we remarked at the time 'it's got to be worth a try.' Today, readers are still asking for copies of that issue, proving Cosmo just can't give too much sex advice (Cosmopolitan, 1997).

In this extract orgasm is represented as a goal and Cosmopolitan is represented as women's advisor for how to reach this goal. However, the reference that appeared in the magazines contained contradicting messages. On the one hand, as presented above, they presented orgasm as a goal; on the other hand, as presented in the extract below, they argued against the same notion:

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).

In this extract the writer shakes off the idea of sex as a test and orgasm as its aim. The earlier Agony Aunt in Woman's Weekly also argued against orgasm as the main aim of sex:

If you become obsessed with orgasm, each time you make love may become a test for some particular desired sensation instead of a means of showing affection (Woman's Weekly 1988).

This extract presents certain women in a negative manner, women as obsessive who see sex as a test. Woman's Weekly argues in this extract that the aim of sex should be to show affection, and not to orgasm. Cosmopolitan kept orgasm as the only aim of sex even whilst arguing against orgasm as the 'be-all-and-end-all' of sex, as is presented in this reply to a reader's letter:

Emphasise to him that what makes sex fun for you isn't the final destination but the entire ride (Cosmopolitan, 2001).

The last extract demonstrates how orgasm is taken for granted as the aim and end point of sex. Similarly to Woman's Weekly, Cosmopolitan produced negative images of women who care too much about orgasm. For example:

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).

As was evident, Cosmopolitan took upon itself the mantle of women's advisor in their efforts to achieve orgasms. It used metaphors such as 'marathon', suggested techniques and encouraged the investment of effort. Simultaneously, ignoring the internal contradiction, they used known stigmatising images to portray women who aimed 'too much' to reach orgasm; orgasm was linked to women's gender identity.

4.3.3 Orgasm as a physical and an emotional experience

Both magazines portrayed orgasm as a physical and an emotional experience. Cosmopolitan, especially during the third period, put the physical representation of orgasm forward (see appendix 5). A typical example of discussing orgasm in physical terms was:

Kinsey and others have stated that during sexual arousal and orgasm, an increased rate of breathing and shortage of oxygen occur, similar to the shortage of air experienced by long-distance runners (Cosmopolitan, 1973).

This extract describes the physiological impacts of orgasm. It repeats the metaphor of sex as a marathon, comparing the experience of a run to that of a sexual act. The description strengthens the representation of the experience as a healthy one.

Orgasm was also represented as an emotional experience. As such it was mainly described as an 'out of control' experience and linked to the notion of 'giving oneself' to the moment or to the partner. For example, the following extract was taken from a reader's confession about having sex during a vacation:

Then he gently rolled on top of me and we had very fast, very furious sex. I had the most incredible orgasm and cried out despite myself. He came hard too, and for a moment, we just lay there, holding each other and breathing hard (Cosmopolitan, 2001).

In this extract the notion of 'out of control' is related to visual and aural images of orgasm. These images are connected to both the physical and the emotional aspects of the experience; orgasm as an experience that takes over one's body and soul. Usually, the physical and the emotional representations were combined. Orgasm was a body and mind experience and that was its point of difference:

And quickies are a great way to de-stress. Stripped of all of the glorious trimming, an orgasm, at its most fundamental, is just the physical release of built-up tension in the body (Cosmopolitan, 1999).

In this extract, orgasm sounds like one's personal natural spa; a bodily function that aims to de-stress oneself. The combination of the emotional and the physical representations strengthens the notion of orgasm as natural and healthy for one's body and mind. This combination was also used as an indication of a healthy sexuality and a healthy self. The following quote, taken from a feature about women's descriptions of orgasm, illustrates this idea:

Orgasm is for me mostly a physical thing, although I sometimes feel it as being psychological (...) I think in a well-adjusted person an orgasm should be both physical and psychological, but I wouldn't call myself well-adjusted (Cosmopolitan, 1972).

The woman illustrates the importance of the combination between the physical and the emotional experiences, as she suggests that only balanced women have orgasm that brings the two together. She uses both the presence of orgasm and its quality as an indication of a balanced character.

4.3.4 Orgasm as a relational experience

Orgasm was represented as a relational experience in the sense of being a romantic experience that bonded two partners together, and in the sense of being important to the woman's partner.

4.3.4.1 Orgasm as a romantic experience

Orgasm as a romantic experience was presented as enhancing the bond between a woman and her partner. A typical example was:

For the best bond, orgasm together while gazing into his eyes (Cosmopolitan, 1999).

Occasionally, there was a conflict between the physical representation and the romantic one. In the following extract the writer challenges Masters and Johnson's research, which measures orgasm as a physiological response. The writer was introduced as holding a PhD, thus it was a case of one 'expert knowledge' versus another:

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).

In this extract the writer posits a hierarchy of orgasm in which the romantic experience is more highly valued. However, there were other cases, such as the following extract, in which the romantic representation was challenged. This extract was taken from a feature about the merits of having a 'bimboy' (bimbo boy) lover:

and who needs conversation when you've got a lean, keen orgasmatron just waiting to do your sexual bidding? (Cosmopolitan 1995)

Implicitly, this extract presents the emotional connection between partners and the orgasm as two opposites. As such, orgasm is not presented as a romantic experience but rather as a physical one which is preferred by the independent 'Cosmo' girl who has a bimboy lover. However, Cosmopolitan did not always follow this image and often supported the romantic representation of orgasm, considering it as an integral part of the romantic relationship, and emphasising its contribution to the bond between the two partners.

Usually, there was no discrepancy between the representation of orgasm as a physical experience and of orgasm as a romantic experience, and it was presented as a combination of the two. Woman's Weekly represented orgasm in a similar manner. The

following is an example of a reply to a female reader who complained that her partner suffered from premature ejaculation:

Asking him to give you an orgasm in other ways, before and after his, will at least deal with the physical frustration and make you feel more cared for (Woman's Weekly, 1996).

These two representations of orgasm did not challenge each other but instead complemented one another. Orgasm was presented as a multidimensional experience: physical, emotional and romantic; an experience which fulfils both physical and emotional needs. This was its point of difference.

4.3.4.2 Women's orgasm as important to men

Women's orgasm was presented as important to the partners. Women had an obligation, not only to themselves but also to their lovers, to experience orgasm. The following extract taken from a reader's letter in Woman's Weekly, presents that notion:

I fear he may get fed up with my inability to reach a climax in intercourse (...) I am afraid my husband might want to have experiences with other women and I can't blame him (Woman's Weekly 1982).

This extract presents the notion that women who did not experience orgasm failed both as lovers and as women. It was taken for granted that the inability to experience an orgasm could be a reason for men to leave their female partners or to be disloyal to them.

Women's orgasms were not only women's aim, but also their partners'. The following extract, written by a man, illustrates this:

I felt a wave of panic. What if I couldn't bring her to orgasm? (Cosmopolitan, 1980).

The female orgasm is presented here as a high bar to pass. Much pressure was put on men to deliver the desired outcome; it was their manly duty to ensure that their partner would experience orgasm. The following extract, written by a man, illustrates how female orgasm was seen as integral to a man's expression of his manhood and thus linked to his gender identity:

You're not man enough to get her to the place she wants to be. You see, once a man realises there is more to sex than his orgasm, he wants his partner to feel the same release he experiences (Cosmopolitan, 1996).

Female orgasm is presented as both sexes' wish. Both want women to 'get to the right place'. Failure to experience orgasm is a threat on both partners' gender identity and on the stability of their relationship.

4.3.5 Multiple and mutual orgasm

Orgasm was presented as common experiences to women and men. The message was that they were similar in their capability to reach orgasm, except for the fact that only women could experience multiple-orgasms. The following extract, written by a man, illustrates this point:

About the only advantage the penis has is that you can pee out of a train window, but I'd swap that for multiple orgasms any day (Cosmopolitan, 1980).

This extract implies that multiple orgasms are experienced by all women and that these experiences are so wonderful that the writer is ready to exchange his manhood for this experience.

Mutual orgasm was seen as the ultimate connection between two partners, as presented in the following extract taken from a feature advising women according to their star-sign:

You love mutual orgasm as it provides emotional and carnal bonding. So use your skilful pelvic rotations to ensure you enjoy orgasmic pleasure together (Cosmopolitan, 1990).

Mutual orgasm is described as an extremely romantic experience, one which can be easily reached by the application of physical techniques. Once again women were

encouraged to work towards this goal. Occasionally, mainly in the first period of *Cosmopolitan*, mutual orgasm was presented as rare:

So simultaneous orgasms are certainly far less common than one might hope (...)

Dr McCary concludes that neither you nor your partner will attain peak pleasure if you both persist in trying for the 'perfect' union (*Cosmopolitan*, 1979).

In this extract, women are advised against trying too hard to reach mutual orgasm. This advice is contrary to the common message of *cosmopolitan* that presented mutual orgasm as a desirable aim.

In *Woman's Weekly* there was no reference to the notions of multiple and mutual orgasms in the early period. In the later period there were a few references to mutual orgasm that came in response to women's questions about partners who 'came too quickly' or about not experiencing orgasm together. The Agony Aunt's attitude to mutual orgasm was dual: On the one hand, she reassured her readers that a mutual orgasm was not a 'must' for a pleasurable sex life. On the other hand, she gave the impression that by following a few simple steps, everyone could reach a mutual orgasm. For example:

But a swift finish is natural for many men and often preferred, so although he could learn to prolong his arousal (I'm sending you notes). It might be easier for you to climax during foreplay and let him keep to his usual timing. Explain that if you take more time and focus on your pleasure you'll be able to reach satisfaction

before intercourse, and maybe again in harmony with him (Woman's Weekly, 1998).

This is a reply to a woman who complained that her partner 'came' too quickly. Though the Agony Aunt reassured her that it is perfectly natural, and suggested that she explained it to her partner, she concluded in reinforcing the notion of mutual orgasm as harmonious, and reassuring the reader and her partner that it is indeed possible by following her notes.

4.3.6 Problems with orgasm

Acknowledgement of the fact that having problems with orgasm is a recurrent phenomenon was occasionally found in both magazines, usually in the problem page. For example, in a reply to a woman who experienced orgasm by masturbation but experienced problems with it during intercourse, the Agony Aunt wrote:

Your ability to have an orgasm already places you ahead of many women who cannot manage it (Cosmopolitan, 1981).

The Agony Aunt of Cosmopolitan applies a competitive driven attitude and employs the marathon metaphor. She uses a goal-oriented discourse and presents orgasm as something that women should manage. She also implies that there is a division to successful and failing women; those who can manage it and those who cannot. Thus, even when

discussing the frequency of absence of orgasm as a phenomenon, it was presented as an individual failure.

The discussion of problems with orgasm decreased significantly after 1983. There was still a lot of information given about ways to reach orgasm, but not much was discussed in relation to the experiences of problems with orgasm, and even less was mentioned in regards to women who had never experienced it.

When discussing the absence of orgasm, it was mainly depicted as a source of negative emotions for women. This discussion was frequently related to the contemporary social pressure to orgasm, both by *Woman's Weekly* in the first period and by *Cosmopolitan*. For example:

And for every woman who feels she now has the right to sexual satisfaction, and who can now speak openly about her desires, there is another woman who interprets that right as an obligation. 'Can do' becomes 'must do', leaving many women feeling inadequate and uncomfortable (*Cosmopolitan*, 1979).

This extract offers a partial explanation for the decline in the discussion about problems with orgasm. Perhaps the first period, straight after the Woman's Movement had grown, brought a previously unobservable problem to light. By the 1990s it was no longer a novel topic and as such was less discussed.

This extract also illustrates that even while discussing social influences and the importance given to women's orgasm in western society, there was a sense of individual guilt. The responsibility for having negative emotions and for feeling inadequate and uncomfortable was always put upon the individual and never directed towards her social milieu. This was strongly evident in the following extract:

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. Susan, who was twenty, seemed somewhat emotionally shallow, as though she had never made contact with her real self or any of the superficial men who she chose for her sexual partners. 'If I don't have an orgasm', she said, 'I feel totally dissatisfied and a little resentful towards the man' (Cosmopolitan, 1972).

In this extract there is a strong sense of blameworthiness as well as an offensive statement regarding the identity and the relationship of those who were disappointed by absence of orgasm. Women who 'aimed too much' were presented as 'unbalanced', 'immature', 'shallow' and as having 'superficial relationships'. No reference was made to prevailing social influences and the blame was placed squarely with the individual.

Following the representation of orgasm as important to men, there was also a discussion of the negative effects of problems with orgasm upon one's relationship and upon one's

partner. Such discussion was evident in the following extract, which was part of a 'personal story' given as an illustration in a feature about 'grown-up sex':

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).

Again, there was a sense that a relationship could fail because of the lack or absence of orgasm. Female orgasm was depicted as the only sexual satisfaction and of high importance to men. The woman was the source of the problem because she did not communicate her wishes. Change was highly desirable and possible for all.

4.3.7 Explanations for presence and absence of orgasm

Taking into account the positive image of orgasm and the negative effects of not achieving one, it was not surprising that a frequent topic in *Cosmopolitan* and *Woman's Weekly's* problem pages was how to reach orgasm and explanations of absence of orgasm. The main message was that there were ways and means to solve the problem, or at least to increase the frequency of orgasm. The underlying assumption was that every woman can experience orgasm and that the women and their partners had complete control over the frequency with which it appeared.

Four lines of explanations were identified: The first was that one's mental or emotional state had a strong influence on one's orgasm. This included long-standing inhibitions rooted in one's childhood (identified in *Cosmopolitan* only), one's self-esteem, one's feelings at the moment of the sexual act, and with regards to an excessive wish to experience orgasm. A typical example was:

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).

The writer suggests that every woman can experience orgasm and relates the ability to perform to her sense of womanhood and her feelings about her gender identity. The assumption presented is that orgasm is a natural act that is blocked by emotional resistance, which is connected to one's issues with her gender identity.

The second type of explanations rooted the problem with physical variants, and came up with solutions in the form of sexual positions and techniques which could encourage orgasm:

Follow our exercise plan for seven minutes everyday and you'll build up to the most incredible orgasms. Sexual fitness here we come! (*Cosmopolitan*, 1995).

The implicit notion brought up in this extract, which was similar to the previous argument, was that every woman could achieve orgasm; the ability, responsibility and blame were placed squarely with her. Physical factors were also mentioned in *Woman's Weekly* and in other features of *Cosmopolitan*, especially in relation to scientific knowledge. For example:

Researchers at Bowling Green State University in the US concluded women actually need vigorous physical stimulation to achieve orgasm (*Cosmopolitan*, 1999).

Hence, physical explanations promoted the notion that orgasm was a physical outcome that could be attained through certain techniques.

The third line of explanation focused on women's awareness of themselves, their bodies and their activities, highlighting the perception that women should take responsibility for their orgasm and be assertive in this sense:

Remember your body is independent of your partner's. Pleasure yourself. Find your G-spot with a vibrator (*Cosmopolitan*, 1997).

I suggest the easiest way to regain your joy in it is to rediscover sexual pleasure for yourself - it's then only one simple step to transferring it to love-making with your husband (*Woman's Weekly*, 1994).

In common with images of orgasm as physical, these explanations seemed to undermine the role of relationships as the basis for pleasure. Women were encouraged to be independent and to gain full control over their orgasms, finding their own pleasure through masturbation.

The fourth line of explanation, which co-existed with the other lines of reasoning, related to one's relationship with her partner, and in particular to the communication between the two partners, regarding it as essential for the success of the experience. A typical example was:

A couple who are not communicating well generally are not able to communicate about sex. And when they cannot talk about sex the woman is far less likely to experience orgasm (Cosmopolitan, 1983).

The argument presented in this extract is that open communication paves the way to orgasm. The implied representation of orgasm in these explanations was of orgasm as an indicator of one's relationship, where presence of orgasm symbolised good relationships. Nevertheless, it was still the woman's responsibility to work on her relationship and on the communication between the partners.

All four explanations co-existed and recurred, but the mental-emotional reasoning was slightly more common in justifying problems with orgasm. The common notion was that women did not achieve orgasm because of their inhibitions and their inability to let go.

For example, in *Woman's Weekly* (1999) a woman sent in a letter saying that she did not orgasm during intercourse; she and her husband took taking turns to climax; she experienced orgasm during the 'foreplay' and he experienced orgasm during intercourse. And yet, she said that she felt guilty for not having mutual orgasm. Although the Agony Aunt empathised with their sexual behaviour and acknowledged the advantage of such an arrangement, she concluded saying that part of the problem related to the woman's inability to let go:

I'm sending you a leaflet about getting the position right and learning to let go when you're ready (*Woman's Weekly*, 1999).

In this extract there is a reference to expert knowledge and expert help. These references were common in both magazines. A typical example was:

A good book about sexual technique is 'the Book of Love' by David Delvin (...)
If you continue to feel worried, you could ask your doctor to put you in touch with a specialist in psychosexual medicine (*Woman's Weekly*, 1984).

Indeed, women were provided with a lot of information on how to reach orgasm and were encouraged to take responsibility for their orgasm and to be active. However, at the same time, as was discussed above, there was a contradicting message: Women were advised not to put too much effort into the task of reaching an orgasm, since one could not achieve orgasm if one tried too much. For example:

It (orgasm) is certainly an important part of sex and one which, paradoxically, is more likely to happen if it is seen as precisely that: a part of the entire sexual experience, and not the whole show (Cosmopolitan, 1983).

They were also warned it might upset their partner. For example, in the following extract taken from an advice column written by a man:

A wife who demands orgasm (I'm not saying she shouldn't) may stir up in her mate deep-rooted feelings of sexual inadequacy which may intensify his sexual reluctance (Cosmopolitan, 1972).

Contrary to the notion of orgasm as a woman's right, which is presented in the extract, and the notion of female orgasm as of great importance to men, the writer introduces a fear of impairing her partners' manhood. This message was contradictory to, but co-existed with the diverse advices given, and the magazine's recommendations, which encouraged women to take responsibility of and be assertive about their orgasm.

4.4 Discussion of findings

The content analysis of Cosmopolitan identified three periods of writing about presence and absence of orgasm. It found that in the period between 1984 and 1993 there was a significant decline in the quantity of publications on the topic. One possible explanation to this temporary variation might be the increased awareness regarding AIDS during that period. In December 1981, the first case of AIDS was documented in the UK. In 1983 the

British media, starting to take notice of AIDS, broadcasted a TV programme called: "The killer in the village", and published a number of articles on the subject (Kanabus & Fredriksson, n.d.). In 1985 the local media put pressure on the government to launch a campaign about safe sex and AIDS (Joffe, 1993). It may be that *Cosmopolitan* was influenced by contemporary panic of AIDS and of sex to some extent, and thus chose to be less explicit in its discussions of the subject.

When the topic found its way back to the magazine, the representation of it remained the same, but was intensified. The positive representation of orgasm was strengthened; there was an increase in the discussions of orgasm mainly as a valuable experience and as a physical one. In contrast, discussion concerning problems with orgasm decreased. These changes increased the dichotomy between presence and absence of orgasm and marginalised women who did not experience orgasm. Similar changes occurred in *Woman's Weekly's* writing about the subject. There was more discussion of orgasm as a valuable experience, and a new discussion of orgasm as a physical and a mental experience and of mutual orgasm emerged, while the discussion of absence of orgasm decreased.

Shift in trends were also identified in the explanations for presence and absence of orgasm. Over the years both magazines offered similar explanations, such that are concerned with emotions, the physical aspect, knowledge and activity and relationships. However, in the third period of *Cosmopolitan* and in the second period of *Woman's Weekly* the focus on woman's responsibility over their orgasms was intensified. In both

magazines the frequency of explanations concerning woman's own activity and knowledge increased. The difference between the two magazines in regard to the explanations given was that in Woman's Weekly, the accent was put on the emotional aspect, while in Cosmopolitan the accent was put on the physical aspect.

However, beyond these changes, a very similar line of representation of orgasm was presented. Orgasm was portrayed as the aim and the end point of sexual encounters, and as an extremely positive experience. It was considered as healthy, both physically and emotionally, as a woman's right and as important to one's partner. In addition, orgasm, multiple orgasms and mutual orgasm were all depicted as natural, normal and common. Much information, regarding ways to reach orgasm, was given. This strengthened the representation of orgasm as a desirable aim for women, and encouraged them to take responsibility over their orgasms. The message delivered was that every woman could and should experience orgasm and that it was entirely in her hands to do so.

The female orgasm was also linked to woman's gender identity. Experiencing orgasm was regarded mainly as a sign of mature sexual womanhood, but also of a good relationship and of a partner's manhood. A very negative image was attached to women who aimed too strongly towards orgasm, an image which was opposite to that of a real woman. They were labeled with adjectives such as 'nymphomaniac', 'unbalanced' and 'immature'.

According to Ballaster et al. (1991), the messages transmitted by women's magazines', including *Cosmopolitan*, are contradictory in that 'natural' femininity can be achieved only through hard labour and includes an internal tension between the importance of (heterosexual) relationships, self-responsibility and pleasure. This research identified two paradoxes: The first, between orgasm as a natural experience and as an aim that requires working towards. The second paradox is between orgasm as an act for one's pleasure, and orgasm as important to one's partner, whereas its absence threatens upon the partner's manhood.

Fundamentally, the reason for this tension is derived from the contradicting trends; the focus on oneself versus the focus on one's relationship. Female orgasm was considered at first as part of the 'radical *Cosmopolitan*' and slowly became evident in other women's magazines, and was considered a symbol of the new liberated woman. It represented a contemporary understanding that sex should be enjoyable for both men and women. It was part of the message to women that they should be more assertive, and that they should take care of themselves. Yet, the discussion about female orgasm did not subtract from the focus on relationships. Much of the discussion regarding women's orgasm evolved around their partners' wish for them to orgasm. Women were encouraged to be proactive about their orgasm, as long as it did not threaten upon their partners. The findings of this thesis correspond with Ballaster et al.'s (1991) research, which claims that, despite apparent change of attitudes in women's magazines, they were consistent in their approach to women's role within the domestic and private frameworks:

Although, unlike the Lady Magazine of the late eighteenth century, most women's magazines of today can and do address women's rights to orgasmic heterosexual sex, labour outside the home or financial independence, by their very nature they continue to (...) relocate women within domestic and private frameworks. Orgasm thus makes a woman a better partner for her man, labour outside the home makes family or private life more exciting (Ballaster et al. 1991:172).

Moreover, women were constantly blamed for their condition. They were frequently reminded of the importance of orgasm for both them and their partners, yet were blamed if they tried too hard, or if their self-esteem and emotions were affected by the absence of orgasm. They were not only blamed but stereotyped. These stereotypes related to one's gender identity and one's relationships: Problems with orgasm became a symbol of women who were not liberated, not feminine, had bad relationships, and who were obsessed with orgasms.

Overview of Chapter Five

This is the first chapter that analyses the data extracted from the interview based study. It commences with an exploration of the common sources of the social representations of orgasm in current British culture, and the content of those sources. It establishes that the interviewees consider their social milieu as placing them under some pressure to experience orgasm, due to the inclination toward the glorification of the female orgasm, and pathologisation of women who fail to have orgasms. The chapter continues with an analysis of the interviewees' explanations for the presence and absence of orgasm, and identifies the conflicting underlying understandings of orgasm, both as a loss of control and as a gain of control. It establishes that many interviewees produce explanations which are self-blaming, yet at the same time, use other explanations which dissociate the blame from the self, by rooting the grounds for absence of orgasm within their partners or within physical variants.

CHAPTER 5: SOCIAL REPRESENTATION OF PRESENCE AND ABSENCE OF ORGASM AMONG BRITISH WOMEN

5.1 Sources of the social representation of orgasm

Most of the interviewees mentioned the media as a source of information about the female orgasm (see Appendix 6). Women and teenage magazines were the most mentioned media source; in particular, a number of women referred to the *Cosmopolitan* magazine as a strong communicator on the subject and the first to include reference of it. Women were divided in their evaluation of the value of the magazine's discussions of orgasm. Some women said that *Cosmopolitan* "was a much needed women's liberator" (Felicia, ONP²). Mainly, referring specifically to the 1960s and 1970s, they presented *Cosmopolitan* as the first social forum that openly discussed the subject of female orgasm. Other women argued that women's magazines, including *Cosmopolitan*, played a strong role in creating a social pressure on women to achieve orgasms. It seems that the two standpoints resulted from a situation in which, on the one hand, many women felt pressurised from women's magazines discussion about sex and orgasm. On the other however, they did not have an alternative source of information and felt isolated by the lack of information and social discussion about the topic. For example, one interviewee stated:

² The letters in the brackets stand for a member of a group. YP = 25-32 years old woman defining herself as having problems with orgasm; YNP= 25-32 years old woman defining herself as not having problems with orgasm; MP= 48-55 years old woman defining herself as having problems with orgasm; MNP= 48-55 years old woman defining herself as not having problems with orgasm; OP= 60-67 years old woman defining herself as having problems with orgasm; ONP= 60-67 years old woman defining herself as not having problems with orgasm.

I just think that there is this huge pressure on women to kind of do it and stuff, and I just think that there is not enough, I don't really think outside magazines there is anywhere really that women... O.K. I think times are changing but I think there are a lot of women that kind of beat themselves up about it that they kind of don't have them [orgasms] and do keep quiet. (...) I think there are a lot of women in that position and I didn't really have anyone to talk to. A lot of people slam Cosmo and Vogue and all these glossy mags and say, you know, 'they are sort of full of sex and stuff'. But for me I think 'God that is where I got a lot of my information from' you know, whether it is exact or not at least you kind of get information (Brenda, YP).

There is both criticism and appreciation expressed in the extract above. The woman presents the common argument against women's magazines, which she agrees with up to a point, but then defends the same magazines as the only source of information for her. The criticism of women's magazines as pressurising women was also mentioned in connection with other forms of media like films and TV. However, it was most often mentioned in relation to women's magazines, possibly because they were the source most discussed by the interviewees.

Books were mentioned predominantly by the 'middle' and 'oldest' age group, citing non-fictional writing, like the 'Hite Report' and Germaine Greer's work, as well as fictional novels, in particular DH Lawrence's 'Lady Chatterley's lover':

We started talking about it, reading when I was about 16, because we all read Germaine Greer, and that was what we wanted. And there were lots of books out around that time (Sarah MNP).

Other media, such as films, television and radio, were mentioned less by interviewees. The internet was only mentioned by one woman. Within this context, the movie 'When Harry met Sally', and the advertisement for Opium perfume (which was in the public domain at the time of the interviews, featuring a nude photograph of the model Sophie Dahl) were singled out by some of the women.

Conversations with friends were mentioned less than the media as a source of information and of images concerning the presence and absence of orgasm (see Appendix 6). Almost one half of the interviewees said that they talked about orgasm with friends. However, only a few of them mentioned meaningful conversations with friends, as illustrated below:

Interviewee: I was in my 30's when I went to college [laughing]. I had my three children and that's when I...

Interviewer: You read about it or you heard from...

Interviewee: I read and we talked, I got to know more women and they were strong women they were independent women and I learnt a lot then, I learnt that women could enjoy sex (Casey, OP).

Unlike this woman, most of the interviewees said that they had only had superficial conversations about the subject and that orgasm was mentioned mainly through jokes. Many felt uncomfortable discussing the subject at the risk of seeming disloyal to their partners:

Because I have been married a long time, you know, I feel, I think it is strictly between my husband and me, you know. It is private and I wouldn't talk to anyone else about it. I might talk about relationships I had a long time ago but I certainly wouldn't talk about my sexual relationship with my husband (Lana, MNP).

The extract demonstrates the intimate quality ascribed to discussion of sexual matters and orgasm in particular. Women said that even when they discussed their sex life with their friends, their conversations remained general, and they did not go into details.

5.1.1 Comparison between groups: Conversations with friends

Differences between the three age groups in regards to conversations with friends about the subject were identified. The inclination in the 'youngest' and 'oldest' age groups was to talk about the presence and absence of orgasm on a general or a more intimate level (see Appendix 6). In contrast, very few women in the 'middle' age group discussed this topic with their friends. The explanation to this might derive from their status: whether or not they are within a long-term relationship. Women talk less about sex when they are in

long-term relationships because the subject is not new and exciting anymore, and they feel disloyal to their partners. Indeed, many of the ‘middle’ group interviewees were at the time of the interview in long-term relationships.

5.2 Social representation of orgasm

5.2.1 Glorification of the female orgasm

Interviewees described the representation of orgasm in their social milieus. The predominant theme was the glorification of the female orgasm, which came up in a number of forms. Most notable was what could be termed as the ‘orgasmic imperative’ (Potts, 2000): the notion that orgasm is indispensable to a woman’s life, and is an essential element of sexual encounters:

And sort of you get the feeling that it’s quite sad that sometimes that is the ultimate of what people try to achieve, you know, when having sex, like you go towards the orgasm and that’s it! And there is nothing more, so either you have an orgasm or you don’t. (...) sex and orgasm go together; you don’t have sex on its own, the English at least (Zoe, YNP).

The interviewee suggests that according to English social norms, orgasm is integral to the experience of ‘having sex’. These norms offer an account of sex which is limiting, whereby orgasm is described not just as the ultimate goal of sex, but indeed as the only

goal. The woman describes this understanding as common place in current English culture, and is critical of it. Similarly, many other interviewees felt that orgasm was presented as a necessary achievement and were critical of this notion. They frequently blamed the media for promoting such a notion and creating pressure on women. For example:

I think it's, I don't know, I sometimes think, when I listen to things on the radio or women's magazine, that there is a feeling of having to achieve an orgasm. It is a performance and you have got to do well and I think that is how a lot of people feel about it but it isn't really like that. That is not how I see it but you ask how the general population [see it] and I think they do view it as something that they want to achieve, both of them (Renee, OP).

A few women also criticized men for promoting a goal oriented understanding of orgasm:

The sense that I get, not from all the blokes I work with, certainly some of them, it's like the orgasms, the coming, is important and it's a goal. It's like when you listen to football on radio. 'Getting there, getting there, it's a goal'. It's that sort of chap thing (Grace, MNP).

In the two preceding extracts, the women created a distinction between themselves and other people. They used this distinction to dissociate themselves from the notion of orgasm as a necessary goal of sex. Similar arguments were raised by other interviewees,

who criticized the cultural image of orgasm as a goal and a necessity. There was a common notion of opposition to the social pressure to orgasm. Some interviewees felt that this pressure was also linked to a negative stigma for not achieving orgasm:

You have got to have millions of them, all the time, and then you are a proper sexual person. I don't think that is really fair because I think there are plenty of women, who don't, or you know, I don't know, girls, I think the media over emphasises it. And women who don't have orgasms feel quite inadequate (Irene, YNP).

The interviewee links the social orgasmic imperative and women's gender identity. She presents a social understanding that relates the notion of being a 'proper sexual women' and the experience of orgasm, and vice versa. This reference to women's gender identities strengthened the orgasmic imperative.

In addition to the orgasmic imperative, interviewees felt that orgasm was socially presented as an extremely positive experience. For example, one woman recalled the image of orgasm she had before she experienced it herself:

Oh yes, I had read about it [orgasm], it was supposed to be such an incredible fantastic experience (Julie ONP).

Others talked of a gap between their own experience and the glorified image of orgasm:

What I expected, from reading books, would be wonderful and painful and I would lose control, I never, I used to have pleasurable feelings but nothing remotely like that (Eve, MP).

The interviewee describes a gap between what she was expecting, based on media portrayals of the experience of orgasm and the actual experience of sex for her. Women described an image of orgasm that was extreme and out of the ordinary. The positive image extended beyond the experience of the woman who experienced it. Some women referred to the visual image of orgasm:

Interviewer: If you think of time when you saw or heard something about orgasm, what do you think were the key images?

Interviewee: In most cases it is like the way the female is, or images sort of this perfume Opium. Very much sort of that, wonderful experience (...)this is a high, a wonderful feeling, I mean red cheeks and looking gorgeous, content, happy, all these things (Sophia YP).

The interviewee suggests that the media represent women who experience orgasm as beautiful. The glorification of orgasm extends beyond the experience to include the glorification of the women who experience orgasm.

5.2.2 Orgasm as a common experience

“Everybody experiences orgasm” was the stated feeling that accompanied approximately a quarter of the interviewees (see appendix 6). The normal state, as was defined by the media, was to experience frequent orgasms:

Well it depends where you look obviously, but if you are looking at women's magazines it seems to be assumed that you are having orgasms anyway (...) it seems to be an assumption that everybody, however young, is having orgasms and it is just a question of having more and better and finding different places to have them and having them quickly (Sue, MP).

The interviewee sees the media as the initiator of the social representation of orgasm as a very common experience, and argues that it fails to acknowledge the existence of other possible experiences, such as the experience of problems with orgasm. This imbalanced representation was also widespread in other social milieus:

And you knew other people were having orgasms. There was no thought that people didn't have orgasms. (...). It was no big deal, we were all sexually active and it wasn't really discussed because it was assumed that people had an orgasm (Tamara, MNP).

This woman presents a situation in which the representation of orgasm as a common experience is never directly addressed but nevertheless remains implicit.

5.2.3 Taboo

Half of the interviewees evoked a taboo concerning the presence and absence of orgasm. Two kinds of taboo were identified. First, a number of women, especially from the 'oldest' age group, recalled past times when orgasm was a strict taboo and was absent from social discourse:

We didn't talk about it [orgasm] much either. I think it was even a taboo subject among girlfriends (...) it was a dirty word, as masturbation or anything you know seen as, you didn't say the word. Unless privately, behind doors, you wouldn't even say the word to your lover really, rather it was all just happening hopefully, and was not referred to really (Beth OP).

The woman says that although orgasm was regarded as a 'dirty word', a taboo, it was believed to be happening behind closed doors. Though orgasm as a taboo now appears to be a thing of the past, there was an accord amongst participants from all age groups that it was absent from contemporary British discourse, in one difference, that currently the presence of orgasm is addressed; it is the absence of orgasm that is disregarded:

I think generally, you know, you could be sat with a group of people 'oh yea great every time' and I think the reality is different (...) I just think there is a real limited information bias for people like me to kind of go out and find out 'hey ok I find it difficult to orgasm, I am not alone' (Brenda, YP).

As the woman suggests in this extract, the common understanding of the presence of orgasm and the feeling of isolation by women who have different experiences does not change with the eradication of certain taboos. Though nowadays the media addresses more openly the themes of sex and sexuality, it ignores the phenomenon of absence of orgasm. Interviewees described a culture in which not only there was no taboo around the presence of orgasm but it seemed to be over-discussed:

I think it is probably harder now for women than it was when I was young, because it is so in your face. It is in everything you read and I sometime wonder whether that's part of what changed in me from being hopeful that it would happen one day to really resenting that fact that I didn't and resenting other women (Eve, MP).

The interviewee argues that the increasing discussion about female orgasm in the media intensifies the pressure to have orgasms felt by women. According to her, as well as many others, the past taboo was replaced by a discourse which pressurised women, glorified the experience of having orgasms, and isolated them in their experience of the absence of orgasm.

5.2.4 Problems with orgasm as a common experience

In contrast to previous themes, in a seemingly contradictory vein, many women talked about the representation of problems with orgasm as a common experience for many. For example:

When I read things addressed to women the impression that I get seems to be that it 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 or sort of how to get bigger better ones out of your boyfriend, you know what I mean? So I have this feeling in what I read all the time that it is quite a problematic area for women to experience or enjoy at all (Leah MP).

Orgasm was depicted as problematic for women. The notion that women found it difficult to experience orgasms constructed women as 'having problems' and did not question the definition of normality:

I think most women don't have as many orgasms as men. Because I know that most women just have sex because they feel they should please their partner and they don't necessarily have an orgasm. They just do it just to get it over with, just to make their partner come so he can go to sleep (Ann, YP).

In the last extract the representation of women as having fewer orgasms than men is constructed as problematic. Women appear to have sex merely to gratify their partner and lull them to sleep. The representation of women as 'having problems' often emerged from a comparison with men. Men were constructed as being more physical, women as more emotional. Hence, men were viewed as simple, whilst women were complicated:

Well I just think it maybe a lot more straightforward for a man. I don't really know because I am not actually a man but that is the way I see it. I think for women a lot of other factors have to be in the equation for it to work. (...) I just think it is more complex for women to achieve an orgasm than a man and I just think there is a bit more pressure on us to do that sometimes (Brenda, YP).

As this woman suggests, the comparison between men and women, and the representation of women as problematic and complex added to the orgasmic imperative. The comparison did not offer a different definition of normality for men and women. Instead it placed responsibility on women to overcome the differences, and to perform sexually like men.

5.3 Interviewees' explanations for the presence and absence of orgasm

Interviewees, from both the 'problems' and the 'no problems' groups, suggested explanations for the presence and absence of orgasm. Social Representation Approach

emphasises the social and collective nature of explanations, and regards them as a process of communicating rather than a reasoning process.

Interviewees' explanations for the presence and absence of orgasm can be classified into six categories: The first explanation was that one's mental or emotional state had a strong influence upon one's orgasm. The second type of explanation was a physical explanation, in terms of bodily characteristics, age, use of medication, and the monthly menstrual cycle. The third type of explanation focused on the women's knowledge of themselves and their body or their activity. The fourth explanation described the presence, but more so the absence of orgasm as related to woman's inherent stable nature.

The last two categories of explanation co-exist with the previous categories outlined above. These explanations emphasised the importance of one's relationship with respect to the presence or absence of orgasm. The fifth explanation was related to the interviewee's relationship with her partner, emphasising the importance of communication and trust in the relationship, identifying these as essential for experiencing orgasm. The final type of explanation focused upon the woman's partner's sexual ability and willingness to 'give' the woman an orgasm. This last explanation was markedly different from the other explanations as it located the reasons for orgasm outside the woman.

Many interviewees suggested a number of possible explanations, especially for absence of orgasm, and felt unsure of which one they subscribed to. It was usual for the women to

present different explanations for the presence and absence of her orgasms. So for example, interviewee number 39 from the 'problems' group used self emotional explanation, relational explanations, as well as explanations related to her partner's willingness to give her orgasm. Hence, while the explanations are presented separately for reasons of conceptual clarity, for many of the interviewees they existed in tandem.

5.3.1 Emotional explanations regarding one self

More than half of the interviewees attribute the presence and absence of orgasm to their emotional state (see Appendix 6). These explanations included both situational explanations and internal stable explanations and were often linked to issues of feeling relaxed and the importance of being in the 'right' state of mind. Linked to this, other predicators such as being on holiday, drinking alcohol and similar situations were described as causes for the presence of orgasm, whilst tension at work, raising children and similar were identified as causes for the absence of orgasm:

Like recently what with the things I was going through, there was a period where I was very tense up and it was difficult to let go. (...) because of things that have been happening at work (...) I couldn't, could not, I just couldn't have an orgasm (Anita, MNP).

In this extract, the interviewee makes a connection between not being relaxed and the absence of orgasm. She suggests a situational explanation for the presence and absence of

orgasm. When the circumstances are such as to enable one to relax, they allow for the experience of orgasm. Many women suggested that their experiences of orgasm should not be understood 'in a vacuum' but as a part of their lives, influenced by other aspects of their lives and the circumstance of the experience.

Emotional explanations were also internal and stable. Women discussed the difficulties in letting go. This was often related to the representation of orgasm as an 'out of control' experience. For example:

I am conscious of always needing to be in control in everything. I think that's partly to do, part of the problem of having an orgasm, but also of having relationships (Eve, MP).

In this extract, there is a prevailing sense of self-blame. Like the woman quoted above, many interviewees offered an internal stable explanation. They defined the causes of their problems as emotional blocks or the women's inherent nature. Sometimes, they did not understand the source of these 'emotional blocks'. In other cases, they offered explanations regarding their childhood. A number of women talked about sexual abuse, emotional problems in the family, and a strict family upbringing.

Another frequent emotional explanation was that of the internal pressure to experience orgasm. A number of women felt that their own pressure upon themselves to reach an orgasm reduced their chances of experiencing one. As one woman described:

When I want one that badly it is hard to have one (...). But sometimes when I have sex and I am not thinking of potting a black ball, I'm not thinking of the end result, I just want to enjoy the pleasure I want to enjoy the moment I want to enjoy him [my boyfriend], it [orgasm] comes. And it comes quicker (...) But when I really want one and it is to escape my feelings it is really hard to have one (Florence, YP).

This interviewee depicts the importance of being relaxed during sexual activity in order to facilitate the experience of orgasm. She describes how by being in a goal oriented frame of mind she prevents herself from experiencing orgasm. Interviewees blamed themselves for regarding orgasm as an aim instead of enjoying the sexual act as a whole.

5.3.2 Physical explanations regarding one self

Approximately half of the interviewees suggested physical explanations for the presence and absence of orgasm. Whilst emotional explanations were, broadly speaking, linked to being relaxed, explanations that pertained to physical issues linked to self were more diverse. Women offered explanations relating to bodily characteristics, medication, age, sexual positions, and the monthly menstruation cycle. For example:

I think maybe that whole thing about a 'G spot', maybe I don't have one or maybe, I don't know, it's in the wrong place. I don't think it is because I am not a sexual person and I don't enjoy sex (...) generally I am quite sexual, so I don't

think it is for that reason maybe it is something biological, physiological, I don't know (Daryl, YP).

In this extract the woman presents two opposite types of explanations for the absence of orgasm; either she is not a sexual person or she has a physiological problem. She argues against the possibility that she may not be a sexual person. Hence, in her mind the only other option is that she has a physiological problem. There is a sense in this extract that physical explanations are used to distance problems with orgasm from one's gender identity. The woman illustrates the difference between being problematic, i.e. being a non-sexual woman, and *having* a problem, i.e. having a physical disorder. It is more comforting for her not to have a G spot than to be considered a non-sexual woman. Her argument is strongly related to the Cartesian dualism of body and mind, in the sense that if the problem is in the mind, i.e. 'not having a sex drive' then it means that it is about whom she is as a woman: a non-sexual woman. However, if the problem is in the body, such as not having a G spot, then it is not about whom she is, rather about what she has or does not have. Hence, having a physical problem helps to protect one's gender identity.

5.3.3 Activity or knowledge explanations regarding one self

Approximately quarter of the interviewees (see appendix 6) suggested explanations based on the importance of their own actions and knowledge for the presence or absence of orgasm. They talked of the importance of knowing one's body, and of masturbating and then using knowledge gained through this practice in sexual encounters:

I mean, I read when I get to the hairdresser I see women's magazines (...) and you see all these articles about 'I never achieve orgasm and bla bla bla' I am a bit mystified by that. I think they haven't experimented enough and they are not prepared to tell men what they want. I have always been very outspoken about my desires and things and basically I have trained my husband to do what pleases me (Tanya, ONP).

In the extract the woman subtly blames other women who do not experience orgasm for not experimenting and not being assertive about their wishes. In her account, being active and assertive, knowing what pleases her and communicating that with her partner is the reason for the presence of orgasm. This category of explanations was more goal and achievement oriented, in contrast with previous emotional explanations, where orgasm resulted from being able to lose control and from *not* aiming to experience it.

These explanations, as was implied in the last extract, were linked to a notion of taking control and responsibility. This created a sense of blameworthiness, which women took upon themselves. For example, in the following extract a woman, who cannot experience orgasm by way of penetration but can by other means, says:

maybe I should masturbate more but I hardly ever, so I think maybe I should take more responsibility for my own body (Amy, YNP).

The line of explanation that focused on one's action and knowledge included an underlying assumption that every woman could theoretically achieve orgasm dependent upon her actions.

5.3.4 Emotional and physical explanation regarding one's nature

Approximately one fifth of the interviewees saw the presence or absence of orgasm as part of their nature, the way they are (see appendix 6). In contrast to the previous line of explanation which focused upon women's ability to control their orgasms, there was a smaller number of interviewees, mainly those with problems, whom held a contradictory underlying assumption, namely that not every woman could experience orgasm at all, or in certain situations. They accounted the absence of orgasm to their own nature, either physical or emotional stable internal characteristic of themselves. For example:

She used to feel that she wasn't a very sexual person and that is exactly how I used to, I used to think 'ok maybe it is just not my thing' (Brenda, YP).

The interviewee talks of absence of orgasm as a part of her gender identity. She used to see it as a stable feature within herself, one that could not be changed. This explanation was used by some to avoid a constant attempt to aim for orgasm. As one woman said:

Well I thought I couldn't, you know. I just thought, because I did enjoy sex very much. I thought that maybe I am one of these people that just couldn't. And I

thought if it ever happened it will happen, I am not going to get involved in this sort of training course (laughing) (Beth, OP).

The interviewee ascribes the absence of orgasm to herself, identifies herself as being part of a group of women who cannot experience orgasm. She emphasises that she does enjoy sex, implicitly arguing against the notion that women who cannot experience orgasm are not sexual women. This line of explanation saves her the need to participate part in an endless effort to experience an orgasm.

5.3.5 Relationship explanations

Explanations for the presence and absence of orgasm considering one's partner and one's relationship were mentioned by more than half of the interviewees (see appendix 6). These explanations focused either on the emotional interaction between the two partners, or solely on the woman's partner.

5.3.5.1 Emotional explanations regarding the relationship

Talking of their emotions within the relationship as influencing the presence and absence of orgasm, women mainly talked of trusting one's partner, feeling safe within the relationship, and of being attracted to him. Similar to emotional explanations pertaining to self, matters related to feeling relaxed and feeling able to lose control were discussed,

but in this case were linked to one's relationship as well as communication within the relationship. That is to say, women talked of emotions that were changeable in the relationship and between relationships. In the following example a woman discusses the need to know her partner well so as to enable her to experience orgasm:

I need to kind of be relaxed and feel comfortable with that person and that I can express myself and then usually orgasm will follow. Whereas if I'm feeling a bit more self-consciousness and we are not really used to each other then it would rarely happen in that situation (Brenda, YP).

This woman describes a need to be relaxed as related to being able to express herself and not being self-conscious. Self-expression and the importance of communication were mentioned in two ways. The first was in relation to orgasm as self-expression a very intimate experience that could be achieved only in a safe environment. Secondly, feeling at ease and comfortable with one's partner was also important insofar as it allowed women to express their sexual wishes:

But now I think it is much easier because I am very much relaxed in the relationship. I think when you relax in the relationship, you know, many years, you can ask for different things but when you are with somebody for a short time you might not necessarily ask for things that you like (Zoe, YNP).

In this extract, the notion of being relaxed is discussed as facilitating one's ability to communicate wishes. Women felt that they needed a safe emotional environment to express their physical and emotional wishes and needs. Feeling safe and relaxed meant being able to negotiate the sexual encounter.

Feelings for one's partner were also linked to orgasm through the attraction and enjoyment of being with that person. This was mainly discussed more in relation to the absence of orgasm than to the presence of orgasm. Women discussed the absence of orgasm as linked to the absence of attraction. For example:

I had two serious long term relationships and it was toward the end of both of those that it just stopped happening, so maybe that was a sign in the relationship that I wasn't finding them sexually attractive or they were not pleasing me anymore (Jill, YP).

In this extract, orgasm is linked to the interviewee's feelings of attraction toward her partner. The presence and absence of orgasm was then used as an indicator of her feelings. Again, it raised questions about women's ability to negotiate and control sexual encounters. Why did women have sex with men they did not find attractive?

5.3.5.2 Physical explanations regarding the partner

The women's ability to experience orgasm also served as an indicator of their partner's skill as a sexual partner. A large number of women made a clear connection between their orgasms and their partners' abilities as a lover (see Appendix 6). They described men 'giving them an orgasm', attributing the women's presence and absence of orgasm to the men's sexual performance. Though some of them mentioned the issue of premature ejaculation, and one talked of the size of her partner's penis, more typically they talked of the man's willingness or inclination to satisfy the woman. For example:

I am very lucky to have a partner that always makes sure that I have an orgasm and so that was, is very important (Felicia, OP).

In this extract the woman talks of the importance of her partner's efforts to make her orgasm. Being a 'good lover' did not merely suggest a physical characteristic, but was linked to one's effort and willingness.

5.3.6 Comparison between groups: 'problems' versus 'no-problems'

In the 'no problems' group self-physical and self-emotional explanations were mentioned by approximately an equal number of women, whilst in the 'problems' group self-emotional explanations were much more common than physical explanations. Moreover, self-emotional explanations were mentioned twice as much in the problems group than in

the 'no problem' group. In addition, 'nature' explanations were three times more prevalent in the 'problems' group than the 'no problems' group.

As was evident in the discussion about physical explanations, these explanations were often used by women as a means to distance the 'blame' from the self. Hence, by using physical explanation the incapacity to experience orgasm was related to having a physical problem, rather than being 'problematic'.

The differences between the groups suggests that women who defined themselves as having problems with orgasm, linked these problems to their nature and their gender identity more than women who defined themselves as not having problems with orgasm and linked absence of orgasm to physical condition or changeable emotional reasons.

The use of physical explanations can be seen as an attempt to avoid the social stigma placed on women whom experience absence of orgasm. However, the use of explanations concerning one's inherent nature can be also seen as an attempt to avoid social pressure and to avoid a constant attempt to achieve orgasm.

5.4 Discussion of the findings

This chapter explored the representation of the presence and absence of orgasm and its sources. This exploration depicted a social milieu that isolated women in their experiences of problems with orgasm and pressurised them to experience orgasm. A contradictory representation of the glorification of female orgasm and the pathologisation of women emerged. The interviewees discussed at length the pressure placed upon women to experience orgasm. This pressure was influenced by an extremely positive representation of female orgasm and a notion that this experience was common for everybody. The data illustrated that, in conjunction with the SRA, social representations of orgasm were used to evaluate situations and people within the social world. Hence, definitions of sex and gender identity were based on the presence and absence of orgasm in which 'proper sex' ended in orgasm, and absence of orgasm was linked to inadequate sexual women. These findings explain the strength of the orgasmic imperative and the difficulty in rejecting it.

The interviewees discussed a taboo about problems with orgasm, which prevented women from discussing openly their experiences of absence of orgasm. In a society that frequently discussed multi-orgasmic women and linked having orgasm with adequate sexual female identity, interviewees felt isolated in their experiences of absence of orgasm.

The findings presented in this chapter continue and extend previous literature about the social construction of orgasm. Potts (2000) described the current orgasmic imperative in New Zealand. She argued that it was difficult for her interviewees to reject this imperative because of the absence of a different discourse within which to discuss sex and orgasm. Jackson and Scott (2001) argued that the female and male orgasm were culturally represented by certain conventions, in which the social meaning of masculine orgasm was more physical, while the feminine orgasm was never just physical. This research depicts the ways in which the comparison between male and female orgasm constructs women experiences as problematic and men's experiences as the norm. Though there was a discussion about the high frequency of absence of female orgasm, this absence was always constructed as a problem with orgasm. In addition, Nicolson and Burr (2003) depicted the discourse of normality around orgasm. In their research, women discussed sexual health according to this social representation of normality and less according to their own experiences. This research supports that definition of normality, which is combined with the glorification of orgasm and contributes to what Potts described as a cultural orgasmic imperative.

Themes of self, control and being relaxed came up frequently whilst discussing explanations for the presence and absence of orgasm. These themes constructed conflicting lines of explanation. The first explanation presented orgasm as influenced by the ability to 'let go'. Orgasm was understood to be an 'out of control' experience which could only be explored in a safe situation that allowed one to be relaxed and open. External and internal stress, such as a strong wish to orgasm, were considered to be

obstacles towards experiencing orgasm. There was an implied understanding of orgasm as self-expression, relating orgasm to a deep sense of self. Hence, in a sense there was a need to silence both internal and external 'noises' in order to reach self-expression.

The second line of explanation took the opposite standpoint and presented the presence of orgasm as the result of women taking control over their sexuality and taking responsibility for their orgasms. This was a goal-oriented understanding of orgasm which described the need to work toward orgasm, to explore one's body and to communicate one's needs and wishes. As opposed to the notion that orgasm can be achieved by loss of control or relinquishing active control, it constructed orgasm as something that can only be achieved by way of 'work'. Although these two notions are contrasting, they both construct orgasm as an aim and as an achievement of the woman.

Both explanations were strongly connected to a notion of blameworthiness; this notion was shared by most interviewees. However, many interviewees simultaneously held another explanation which distanced the blame, locating the explanation within their partners or within their own physical variable. These explanations were also less threatening to one's gender identity. There seemed to be an underlying common understanding, though not voiced by many, that problems with orgasm were connected with not being a sexual woman. Using physical explanations or locating the explanation within their partners were therefore less threatening to one's gender identity as a sexual woman.

Differences between the 'problem' and 'non-problem' groups suggested that women who defined themselves as having problems with orgasm more frequently used explanations that were strongly linked to identity and presented self pathologisation, whilst women from the 'no problem' group more frequently used explanations that distanced the blame away from their gender identity.

Overview of Chapter six

The chapter explores the interviewees' experiences of presence and absence of orgasm. It identifies orgasm, as constructed by women, as a multi-dimensional experience; physical, mental and relational. These in turn divided into sub-categories as follows: physical, natural, emotional, spiritual, healthy, goal oriented and important to one's partner. The chapter expands on ideas presented in chapter five and explores the meanings of orgasm in terms of normality, and as an indication of healthy sexual womanhood and of the existence of a good relationship. Finally, the chapter identifies the implications of the contemporary social representation; one which projects feelings of shame and guilt and which advocates certain sexual behaviour over others.

CHAPTER 6: THE EXPERIENCE OF PRESENCE AND ABSENCE OF ORGASM

6.1 Introduction

The interviewees in this research presented a variety of accounts regarding the presence and absence of orgasm. During the analysis of the interviews it became clear that the meaning of orgasm was discussed both in relation to its presence and to its absence; orgasm receives its meaning not only from its presence but also from its absence, and thus this chapter explores these experiences concurrently. This idea is exemplified in the following extract of an interviewee who discussed orgasm as an emotional experience:

It [being orgasmic] is very cheering. I mean it is something that makes you feel very happy (...) Whereas if it doesn't happen like that I think you are very tense and cross (Kira, ONP).

The woman constructs the meaning of orgasm through her experiences of both its presence and its absence. Indeed, there was a minority of interviewees who stated that they always experienced orgasm during sexual activity and conversely a minority who stated never to have experienced orgasm. For the majority of them, however, both experiences were frequent to a certain degree.

This thesis differentiates between absence of orgasm and problems with orgasm; social elements have an effect on women's experiences in such a way that the absence of orgasm is sometimes related to having a problem with orgasm, and in other times, is regarded as a non-problem (See chapter five which focuses on women's experiences of problems with orgasm).

Women described orgasm as a physical, emotional and relational experience. These three aspects, along with their sub-categories, are presented in the following diagram in a hierarchical order where the most prevalent themes are situated at a higher position:

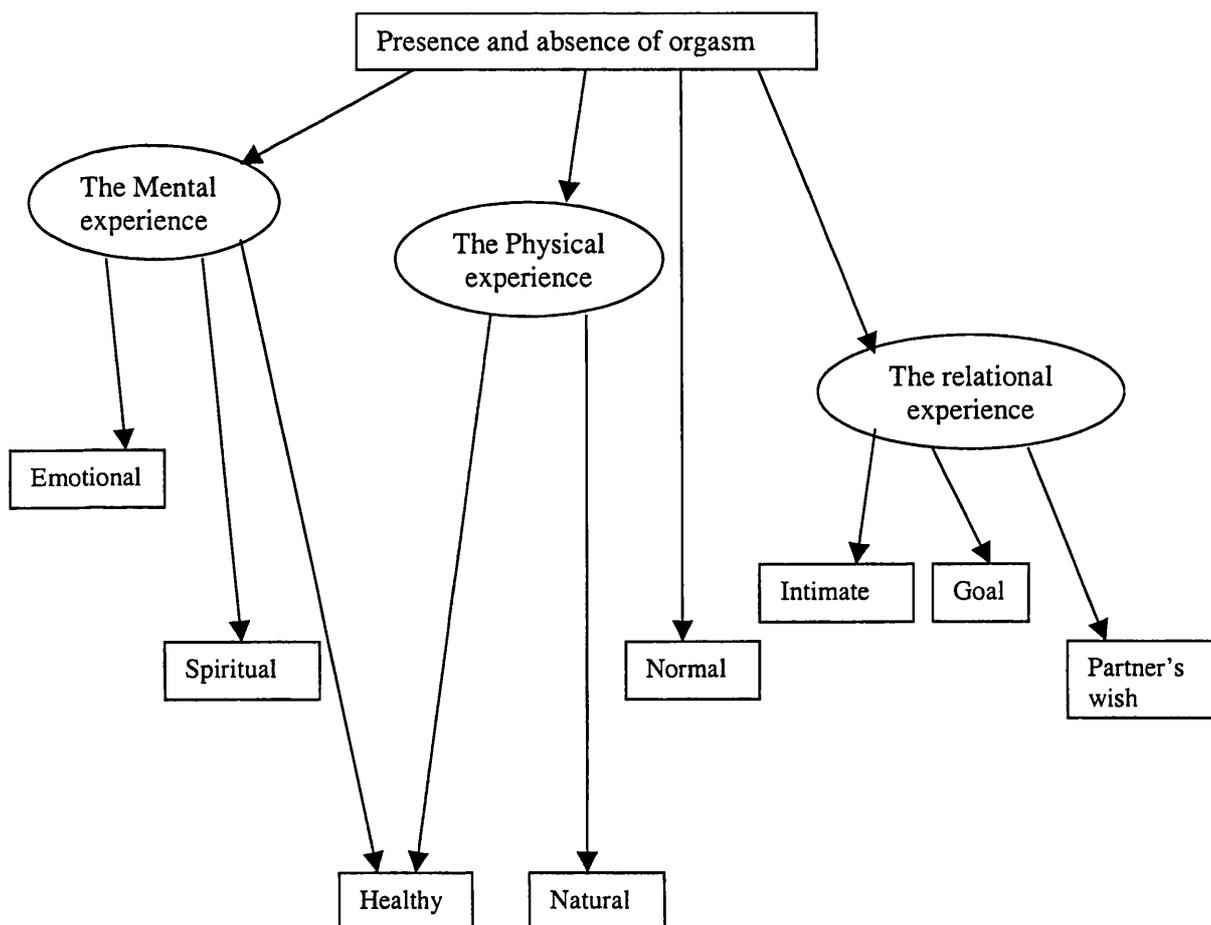


Figure 6.1 Themes in the experience of presence and absence of orgasm

In the interviewees' construction of orgasm, the different aspects were often inter-linked. The vast majority of the interviewees included all three aspects in their description of the experience (see appendix 7). The chapter, for conceptual clarity, incorporates separate analysis of each of the aspects.

6.2 The physical experience

Most interviewees described orgasm as a physical experience (see appendix 7). Usually, the physical sensation of orgasm was referred to in general terms. When discussing the physical experience more specifically the interviewees described a rise in blood pressure, contractions in the body, vibration of the muscles, tingling feelings, heat, wetness, an explosion or release, and then finally a feeling of relaxation. The physical sensation of orgasm was described as going through the entire body, or through large parts of the body, and not as affecting just the clitoris or the vagina. The following extract is an example of such a description:

Interviewer: How would you describe an orgasm?

Interviewee: I think of tingling like all of my senses, like my toes and...physical feeling all over your body not just, you know, in your sexual parts but in your fingers and your face and all of that and very much like loads of energy, loads of blood rushing around (Zoe, YNP).

In this extract the woman gives a description of orgasm as a totality, as something that affects all her senses; her whole body takes part in the experience. It seems important for her to emphasise that it is an experience that involves not just her sexual organs only, but her whole body. She describes orgasm as an experience which goes beyond and above a merely sexual sensation. It is a sexual experience but also more meaningful, because it occurs in all bodily organs; *not just in your sexual parts*. In the majority of the cases, the physical aspect of the experience was considered in conjunction with other aspects of the experience. For example:

Intense pleasure, a great deal of kind of effort, muscle effort and kind of poof release, kind of thing very much in your body, but then at the same time it is almost a sort of an out of body experience, you know what I mean? (Leah, MP)

In this extract the woman describes orgasm as both an internal and an external bodily experience. The physical 'element' gave the experience its biological-natural meaning, whilst other aspects gave it its unique edge, which distinguished the sensation from any other muscle effort.

Release was the most recurring element when describing the physical experience of orgasm. There were very few 'undiluted' physical accounts of release; it seemed to be more than a physical sensation; it was often described as a release of tension, or specifically as a release of sexual tension. Some interviewees, when talking about the

physical aspect of the experience, and frequently in relation to release, related it to a need. For example:

It's like a physical need. It's like, you know, sometimes you've just got to eat something, or you just have to drink something - it's like that, but it's a physical need with an emotional aura to it. (Tanya, ONP)

Again, it seems that the physical aspect 'grounds' the experience and constructs it as a basic and natural activity, similar to eating or drinking, while the emotional aspect 'covers' it with an aura.

Some compared orgasm to other bodily experiences, the most common of which was a sneeze. Other comparisons were made to a heart attack, giving birth, hot flushes of the menopause and eating something with an extreme taste. It seemed that the metaphors of sneeze and of child birth were prevalent amongst society. Indeed, some women mentioned hearing these metaphors used by others:

The only time I have ever heard it being explained is a radio doctor saying it was like a big sneeze. (Chloe, YP)

They always say having babies is like having an orgasm. I don't personally think that. (Tamara MNP)

One should note that these physical activities used as a comparison for orgasm are not usually perceived as pleasant. Mostly, the physical accounts were not 'purely physical' but came together with mental and relational descriptions. It was indeed the other aspects of the experience which rendered orgasm a pleasant physical experience.

6.2.1 The natural experience

A number of interviewees constructed the experience of orgasm as a natural one. This representation was used to describe orgasm as something basic and biological, which occurs naturally in one's body:

A very natural kind of high, something that just happened in the body almost, you know? A kind of very natural sensation to have and enjoyable and relaxed and nice after, so but it is also, there is nothing, it just very natural for me (Amy, YNP)

A different kind of buzz, it's a much more natural buzz though from Cocaine or Ecstasy. (Chloe, YP)

From the extracts above, it is evident that the natural representation of orgasm increases the value of the experience. Seeing orgasm as an ordinary function of one's body was meaningful for some women.

Notwithstanding, the representation of orgasm as natural was also used in a different context; orgasm as natural experiences was used as a signifier of one's identity and one's relationship. Orgasm was considered as an ordinary experience in a loving relationship. Thus, experiencing orgasm naturally without putting much effort into it, was a sign of the quality of one's relationship:

With that man it came also very naturally (...). And the way I think about it is that I didn't have to struggle to reach an orgasm or you know to be disappointed or to fake or anything it came all so naturally and the word natural and genuine I think for me at least are very important (Nicole, MNP).

The woman quoted above ranked her sexual relationship with specific man as better than her other sexual experiences. In this extract she positions natural genuine orgasm in opposition to other experiences of struggle and disappointment. The naturalness of the experience is valued highly by her, and is used as a sign of a very good sexual relationship. The naturalness of the experience was also used as an image of women's sexual health:

Because I've got quite a healthy outlook, I think, on sex and orgasm and I don't think I have any sexual problems so it's quite a natural emotion for me (Gloria, YNP).

This woman, who experiences orgasm as a natural thing, attributes it to her healthy sexual outlook. The underlying argument is that orgasm is a natural experience that is blocked by an unhealthy sexual attitude. Both extracts describe orgasm as a natural experience, yet one which occurs naturally merely in certain situations within the framework of a good relationship, and only for healthy sexual people.

Three women tried to challenge the representation of orgasm as natural. They presented the paradox of the representation of orgasm as both natural and technical, i.e. something which one has to work towards:

It is almost expected, which is really sort of a stupid thing really, it is almost expected that orgasms are just absolutely natural and it is not. It is natural in a way but it is a bit technical as well you know? It is not necessarily all that natural (Zoe, YNP).

Unlike the previous extracts, in the extract above the woman argues against the representation of orgasm as natural. She claims that the experience of orgasm requires practice and skill; hence it is not an experience which comes naturally. This aspect of the experience is usually unvoiced. There was a paradox in the representation of orgasm as both natural and acquired; although many women argued for the need in certain knowledge and skills to experience orgasm, and many discussed the notion of orgasm as a goal to work toward, very few actually challenged the social representation of orgasm as a natural thing.

6.3 The mental experience

Orgasm was described by most women as a mind-body experience (see Appendix 7); the mental experience was on both an emotional and a spiritual level. The mental aspect of the experience was partly related to gender identity and to relationships with other people. When women discussed orgasm as an emotional experience they described not only the moment of orgasm, but also the feeling it gave them afterward; they described it as something which made them feel more at ease with the world, more content and more womanly. When they discussed orgasm as a spiritual experience they described it as either something which connected them to a deeper inner self or as something which transferred them 'from the world to the stars'. Hence, as will be discussed later in this chapter, the mental aspect of orgasm participated in the construction of orgasm as an extreme, out of the ordinary experience. This combination of the mental and physical aspects together, gave the experience its unique nature.

6.3.1 The spiritual experience

Orgasm was constructed by half of the interviewees as a spiritual-mystical experience (see Appendix 7). Paradoxically, orgasm in this sense was constructed as a strong connection to or a separation from the self, the body and reality. An example for the feeling of a deep connection to one's self, is:

It is a very deep communication with oneself and one's spirituality and one's life force. I really think what physically happens to a woman is that she is drawing on something really deep inside her (Anita, MNP).

This extract illustrates the idea about orgasm as a body-mind experience. Although she is describing a spiritual, almost mystical experience, she calls it a physical experience; '*what physically happens*'. Orgasm is described here as connected to the core of oneself on both the physical and the spiritual level. Others described orgasm as a complete loss of the self, of control; as a complete separation from reality and an out of the body experience. This was a mirror image of the same representation; orgasm as a spiritual mystical experience. This was expressed in three ways: as an out of body experience, as a deep connection to one's true self, and as an experience of losing control. For example:

When you are just not in this world, really the feeling that I like most is that when you are just about to cross over to the other world, you are really not, you are somewhere very very different. (Laura, YP)

It's losing barriers, losing boundaries, losing sense of self, losing control, losing consciousness, sometimes you just go. You know that you are going to be lost for a while, lost to yourself, lost to the control irrational stuff... you are just detached for that moment (Amber, MNP).

What both women describe as the most valued element of orgasm for them is the dissimilarity of that experience from daily experiences³; the feeling of being 'out of control'. Orgasm is described here as a momentary escape from reality. The recurring theme in all three extracts is the mystical nature of the experience. For most women, the mystical-spiritual aspect of orgasm was regarded as the positive element of the experience, one which made it an out of the ordinary, unique experience:

It's one of the nicest things one can do without taking any drugs or alcohol, I suppose. It's one of the rare transcendent things that one can routinely do you know, it's pretty cool, that's about it (Hillary, MNP).

Here the mind-body combination is presented somewhat differently, as a natural routine which is also transcendent, out of the ordinary, out of this world. In addition, the mystical representation of orgasm was closely related to a romantic representation of orgasm. Orgasm was not only a connection to one's self but it was also described as a connection to one's partner:

It [orgasm] was very joyous and satisfying and it seems that we could engage emotionally on all levels like, parental, adult, child, you know, all these different roles we might be playing at any one time (...) and that was the most satisfying, they were the most satisfying sexual experiences (Monic, ONP).

³ The second woman describes later in her interview this element as the most significant for her.

In this extract there is a description of orgasm as an experience that is inter-related to the essence of the self. The woman describes orgasm as the connection between the two partners through every aspect of their identity; through their cores. It is a moment in life that embraces within it all other moments in life. In this sense it is an out of the world experience, an event that brings everything together.

However, the spiritual representation of orgasm was considered as problematic for some women, mainly from the 'problems' group. They felt scared or unable to lose control. Many of them regarded the element of losing control as the one that held them back from experiencing orgasm:

I need to be in charge of myself. I am too scared to let go so I envy people for always talking 'yea yea great haaaa' I can't let go (...) I think for me to let go is worse and that is the dilemma because if I let go I think I am going to be lost, I just don't think I would be able to cope (Daisy, MP).

The loss of control was related both to physical and to emotional aspects of orgasm; to the physical aspect, through audio and visual elements of the experience, and to the emotional aspect, through feelings of fear and guilt of losing control. The discussion on feelings of fear and guilt in relation to losing control is developed further in the subsection 6.3.2.

6.3.2 The emotional experience

Orgasm was constructed as a strong and mainly positive emotional experience; one that instigated positive emotions. The interviewees described feelings of pleasure, ecstasy, excitement, liveliness, as well as of deep relaxation. They also mentioned feelings of satisfaction, warmth, and freedom. For example:

Happiness, joy, 'wow that was great' and I think sometimes you get quite emotional as well, I mean it is a big emotional feeling...tears, happiness, joy, being ecstatic, being in love, being happy (Sophia, YP)

In this extract, orgasm is described as an extreme emotional experience, which includes both tears and joy. Here it is described not as an individual experience but as a relational one. The emotions are not just of happiness but also of being in love.

A number of women discussed orgasm as an experience that instigated positive emotions that last for a long period of time after the conclusion of the act itself:

It [being orgasmic] is very cheering. I mean it is something that makes you feel very happy. It makes you feel very physically relaxed I think. And this is only that it makes you feel more at ease with the world. Whereas, if it doesn't happen like that I think you are very tense and cross and likely to be angry and have to be careful with what you say to people, what you say to your husband (Kira, ONP).

In this extract, once again the emotional experience is constructed as a relational one. Being happy and content makes one a better wife, a better person to other people. The long lasting emotions were sometimes more global and related to one's gender identity. For example:

I still need it [orgasm] and it is mainly for the same function, which is to get to sleep. But it stimulates my mind and it makes me feel I am a woman and it gives me zest because I am a sexual woman. (Daisy, MP)

A number of women (from the 'middle' age group) said that they could identify such effect in other women's visual appearance. They discussed the visual image of people who orgasm. They did not refer specifically to the moment of orgasm but to something more general in a person's appearance. For example, one woman described her colleagues from work:

Interviewee: Sometimes I can see with some of my female colleagues when they are looking really ... when they've come out of the bedroom feeling nice and relaxed and easy. You can look at somebody and think, 'I bet you really enjoy it' and with other people, 'you would if you could', and with other people, 'I bet you really have to work on it'. I can't really be specific.

Interviewer: how do you make this...what...in the body language?

Interviewee: I can only describe it as a glow, relaxness, and openness. I don't know; more smiles, more warmth, not uptight. They just look more at peace with themselves (Grace, MNP).

This woman attributed similar effects to the phenomenon as the woman before her, but she referred to them not only as internal experiences but as visual ones; experiences that could be identified by others.

A minority of women, both with and without problems, mentioned negative emotions in conjunction with positive ones. They discussed two kinds of negative emotions: fear and guilt. The negative emotions were mainly related to the representation of orgasm as an out of control experience. Orgasm was described mainly as a battle, an almost unbearable tension between the wish to lose control and the fear of doing so:

It feels like you are in a battle. To me it feels like you are in a battle between something that's... just you're in a real frenzy and frustration and it's like you having to go, you know? You are going sort of up the mountain and you are like jumping off and it is just amazing. I have felt that sort of visual sense, you know whatever as well, but it's that sort of, just that, just wanting it to be over but not, it's like a sort of conflict...at the time, I think you feel, I feel very liberated and safe as well and sort of, but then it is that feeling after, is very exposing and vulnerable I suppose, I feel quite vulnerable (Karen, YP).

It seems that the interviewee refers to sense of the lost of control while orgasm when she uses the metaphor of 'jumping off'. She describes the conflicting emotions involved as liberating and exposing; she feels safe and vulnerable. The sensation of losing control was also related to noises and visual appearances. Some women discussed their unwillingness to be seen in such a vulnerable situation; they were used to being in charge of the way they looked and losing control in this respect created a problem:

Perhaps sometimes I would be with a man that is very cold, it's been very cold, you are having sex and you almost don't want him to see you vulnerable and exposed and being passionate because you are making out that you are quite indifferent (Sue, MP).

This woman describes why she does not want to be seen as out of control; since in some sexual encounters she gives the impression that she is indifferent, she does not want to admit that she gets at all excited about anything. Her behaviour can be understood in the context of the cultural representation of women, that of being indifferent to sex. Here the woman describes women's need to hide and control their sexual desires and the conflict it creates for them. Hence, the guilt and the fear could be understood as a result of conflicting social representations of female sexuality and female orgasm.

One woman emphasised that a comment made by a partner about her visual appearance in the early stages of her 'sexual life' still triggered embarrassment at the moment of orgasm:

We were both 16. I remember having sex with him and feeling really turned on and really enjoying it and then I remember at one point and I think this may be kind of cause for some of it [problems with orgasms], he kind of looked down at me ‘God you are really red’ and he kind of laughed because I looked really funny. And I didn’t, you know, and I didn’t know I was going to have an orgasm but thinking back I could feel that maybe probably I was going to have one. I was quite close to it and I couldn’t you know, he just ruined it all for me [laughing]. So I think from then on I was kind of haunted by that, subconsciously, that image and thinking ‘God I must have looked really strange’ or something so I just wasn’t able to kind of do it (Molly, YP).

In common with previous quotations, this extract presents the conflict between the need to be in control, and orgasm as an out of control experience; once which can be observed by the other party. It seems that both shared a certain visual image of women during orgasm, which was different to how that woman had actually looked like during orgasm. Women, especially in their image of a sexual object, are expected to look beautiful; not strange or funny. It seems that the clash between these images and the reality held this woman back from experiencing orgasm, as she felt that she would not look ‘appropriate’.

6.3.3 Healthy Experience

A number of women discussed orgasm as a healthy experience. Orgasm was represented as important both for one’s physical health and for one’s well being:

I actually think, I am not sure it's true, I think deep down I think it is important for you to have them. I am worried that it might be bad to your health not to have orgasms. I am sure it is a bit old-fashioned maybe, but I am sure it is good for you in some ways. It is just like laughing or something, it is something, I am sure it is important for your good health and happiness (Irene, YNP).

Orgasm is described by this woman, and others, as contributing to one's well being. Nine women said that orgasm is a healthy experience. This woman however, seemed uncomfortable to communicate her belief out loud. This may suggest that other interviewees shared the same belief but were reluctant to disclose this information.

Based upon the idea that orgasm renders women more content and less uptight, it was regarded as healthy, and as important to the relationship:

Interviewee: And it must be good for you.

Interviewer: In what way?

Interviewee: I don't know but it must be, mustn't it? It is how the whole world is related, must be good for you. Better than, not just the state of mind and the happiness, your day-to-day relationships, how you deal with someone, must make you more laid back, easy going, it must do (Ursula, MP).

Following the lines of previous extracts, the interviewee repeats the idea that having orgasm renders her more relaxed, and thus contributes to her relationship with her partner in a positive manner. Her relationship played a very meaningful role in the experience of orgasm.

6.4 Relational and sexual aspect

6.4.1 The intimate experience

A large number of women constructed orgasm as a very intimate bonding experience, which was about communication, sharing and giving and the relationship in general (see Appendix 7). The quotation below illustrates the combination of all these ideas:

I see orgasm as very personal thing, it is not simply a selfish sort of thing, it is something that you share. So it would be very much a union of two people (...). I sort of see orgasm as very together, which is about pleasure for two people (...). It's all very much about being with somebody and as the whole, you know you're sort of coming together, that feeling, yes, that what orgasm is for me now (...). I think it is very much sharing something really really personal, very deep, between two people, I mean it is just expressing yourself in a totally totally different way that is very private to you (...). I think it is very important in a relationship, because it also makes you feel attractive, and attractive to that person. It keeps that going (Zoe, YNP).

The woman raises a number of functions and meanings ascribed to the experience of orgasm; that it has a deep intimate nature, and that she could express herself. She describes orgasm as the sharing of something very intimate and private with another person. Others as well constructed orgasm as a communication which involved intense intimacy and the sense of 'opening up':

In its highest form, it's a real communication with another person (...) the biggest opening up that you can give to another person except in childbirth (Anita, MNP).

Both women described orgasm as including both the notion of giving oneself as well as the notion of receiving from someone else and sharing with that person. While the nature of what was being given was not explicit, the act of sharing obviously held considerable importance:

Giving of myself to somebody else, the sort of ultimate giving (Monic, ONP).

It means that I've shared something and they have given me something and I have given them something, I think something quite special (Molly, YP).

In this extract orgasm is constructed as a gift, as the ultimate giving. It is constructed as a romantic experience in which the woman gives herself to her partner. Orgasm was also constructed as having the function of uniting two partners, bringing them close to one another, and almost merging them into one:

You are perhaps at your very closest to the other person and so that is why it is so fulfilling. The whole just adds a little bit of summit to the bonding that happens between you (...). The complete loss of yourself in the other person and the other person in you... that left you feeling that you were really a unit and this was really the culmination of your relationship with one another (Renee, OP).

The two dimensions of orgasm as a spiritual experience are brought to light in this extract. On the one hand, it is a deep connection. On the other hand, it is a loss of oneself. What this woman values highly is the loss of herself in the other. It repeats the idea of the 'giving' that was previously discussed; she gives herself to her partner, she loses herself in him and he loses himself in her. It is of no surprise then that orgasm was constructed as very important for one's relationship:

And yes I do find that it is quite important to me and to the relationship as well, to have that kind of closeness and intimacy with another person, something that I value very highly (Leah, MP).

For this woman the value of orgasm is derived from its intimate nature. Orgasm is valued highly because it is important to the relationship and creates closeness between the two partners. Moreover, a number of interviewees said that they considered orgasm to be a 'true orgasm' only when it happened within the intimacy of two people. Hence, for them, the key elements in the definition of orgasm were the feelings of closeness and intimacy:

The word orgasm before meant to me that you're sharing something together and you're in a different level together mentally and physically; a togetherness definitely, in something that feels good. In my last relationship – nothing at all. I mean sometimes I did have an orgasm but it wasn't a real one because he wasn't with me mentally. He was always thinking about someone else (Ann, YP).

For this woman, orgasm cannot be understood as a physical experience. For her, as for others, orgasm is fundamentally a relational experience. In this extract, she argues that the physical sensation in itself is not sufficient for the definition of orgasm. She chooses to define non-romantic experiences as not being real experiences of orgasm. For others, when the representation of orgasm as a romantic experience conflicted with their real experiences, it caused them distress and uneasiness. Some women described certain instances as insufficiently intimate or as insufficiently romantic, because they had to fantasise or masturbate during that event, or because they did not reach orgasm through intercourse. They felt that their experiences were not matching their desired romantic idea. The following quotation illustrates such feeling:

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 the real women do and I just like to be able to do it (Mary, MP).

This woman describes a different situation in which all of her experiences are not romantic enough because she cannot experience orgasm through penetrative sex. Unlike the previous woman who blamed her partner for the lack of intimacy and romance, this woman placed the blame upon herself. Her experiences did not match the social representation of orgasm which she extracted from romantic books. She indeed defines her experiences as orgasm, but she finds a gap between what she experiences and how she imagines them to be. Hence, the gap between the social representation of orgasm and the subjective experiences create difficulties for women as it questions their gender identity and their understanding of sex in romantic relationships.

A minority of the interviewees challenged the dominant construction of orgasm as intimate and romantic. Women from the 'youngest' group seemed to feel more comfortable with challenging this representation, although this line of thought was not exclusive to them. The following extract demonstrates a woman openly presenting her inner-conflict with the romantic representation; when describing her first experience of orgasm, she repeatedly shifts between using the romantic construction and challenging it. It was clear that she held both constructions simultaneously:

I think I thought that there was an extra bound between myself and the person that I had it with. I think really that rubbish (laughing) (...). So in some ways he is a first more than just, you know, he means more. And I think that's very romantic and rubbish really (laughing). Could happen with anyone probably, that I really trusted and liked probably. Though I am not sure it might even, I really don't

know, but I think I like to think this is a special person because of a special event and I waited all this time. It's romantic, isn't it? (Beth, OP)

This extract, like the previous one, demonstrates the strong social representation of orgasm as a romantic experience. Although these women explicitly recognise it as being a social representation, and challenged it for being such, they were still strongly influenced by it and processed their experiences through the romantic representation of orgasm.

The representation of orgasm as very important to one's relationship and as an act of giving was related to not being selfish. Few women described themselves as being selfish for wanting an orgasm. In the following extract, the woman explained how her construction of orgasm changed in parallel to the nature of her relationship. Only in non-committed relationships she allowed herself to be 'selfish' regarding her wish to orgasm:

I wouldn't be selfish and say 'oh no hold on a minute', you know, 'I haven't had an orgasm, I want to finish this'. I wouldn't say that. I wouldn't be like that about it (...) If I knew that it was definitely a one night stand I might kind of try and encourage them to do something that would please me more and be more selfish (Jill, YP).

Hence, the romantic representation and the image of giving as opposed to being selfish holds back the woman, and stops her from communicating her wishes. This point

illustrates the difficulties that many women have in openly expressing their needs and wishes during the sexual act. The representation of orgasm as an experience that occurs naturally, especially in romantic situations, makes it even harder for women to communicate their needs.

6.4.2 The Goal of Sex

Many women constructed the experience of orgasm as the goal and the end point of sex, or, as it was frequently ascribed, the 'be-all-and-end-all' of sex (see Appendix 7). Sometimes this notion included representation of orgasm as an achievement of something that one had worked toward:

It is a nice culmination. It is a nice ending sort of like. It is nice. It is where you are both trying to get, isn't it? But you can't always get there. So it is just a sort of... it is what you are working toward (June, MNP).

The woman describes sex as a process of working toward orgasm and orgasm as the ending point both partners are trying to reach. She also presents the difficulty in such a description of orgasm since *you can't always get there*. Seeing orgasm as the goal of the sexual act depicts the sexual act as a process of building up toward the experience of orgasm, and orgasm as the main value of sex:

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, MNP).

This woman does not raise the conflict other women had mentioned when talking about orgasm as a goal, as she has always been experiencing orgasm. For her, sex without orgasm is pointless. She considers orgasm as the only or the main value of sexual activity.

The representation of orgasm as a goal, an achievement or an ending-point, more than any other representation, was frequently challenged. The women challenged the representation of orgasm as the 'be-all-and-end-all' for two reasons: First, they said that sexual activity was a very pleasant experience, with orgasm or without it. Indeed, the added value of the experience of orgasm was folded in the intimacy that was achieved between the partners. That said, once one become too focused on that end goal, the entire act itself was rendered too technical, and thus intimacy was lost. Second, since the reality was that most women did not experience orgasm every time they had sex, seeing orgasm as the be-all-and-end-all would put them and their relationship under a lot of pressure. In their attempt to disregard the pressure, they challenged this representation, as described in the following extracts:

Orgasm is important but there are other things to have as well and one shouldn't forget that like closeness and warmth (Anita, MNP).

To me I don't think you have to take it too much as something that you have to have all the time. It can be something that you can have, sometimes it's not. I think if you are trying too hard to have a climax, to climax, it just doesn't happen (Chloe, YP).

The women attempt to resolve this conflict in various ways: The first woman argues against the notion of orgasm as the only goal of sex and its main value. She incorporates other values of the sexual act such as closeness and warmth into the equation. The second woman accepts orgasm as the final goal of the sexual act, but present an internal paradox about that goal: the more you try to attain it, the more evasive it becomes. Sometimes, the inner conflict is communicated even stronger, as she continues to say:

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, YP).

This extract is contradictory by nature; orgasm is regarded as the ultimate goal and as a non-issue at the same time. This inner conflict is derived from the woman's attempt to narrow the gap between her representation of orgasm and her subjective experience. Other women criticised themselves for seeing orgasm as the goal of sex:

Interviewer: and when you think of the word orgasm what kind of thoughts or images come to your mind? Feelings?

Interviewee: I think, God, difficulties because sometimes I don't find it easy to reach orgasm. And so as wonderful as it is, and it is you know incredible feeling, yes it is kind of sometimes feel 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 some times so I am much more aware of that with myself to try and stop myself of doing that making it the end goal, and just enjoying the moment. I think it is sometimes pressure (Molly, YP).

These last two extracts illustrate a major conflict in women's subjective experience; the difficulty in finding a satisfactory position between the social representation of orgasm and their subjective experiences. On the one hand, they wanted to experience orgasm and tried their best to achieve one. On the other hand, they felt they should not try since orgasm should come naturally. The effort not only placed them under a lot of pressure but also decreased the likelihood of reaching the goal. The conflicting representation of orgasm as a goal and orgasm as natural left them with guilt feelings, directing criticism toward themselves.

6.4.3 The partner's wish

Women's orgasm was described by half of the interviewees as important to their partner (see Appendix 7). In this sense orgasm was a relational experience, which derived some

of its values from its meaning to one's partner; women felt that men saw their orgasm as a main signifier for their enjoyment:

Having an orgasm my partner feels that I'm having an enjoyable satisfying time, and not having it means that it's not that, sex isn't that great maybe, which isn't at all true so it's hard to kind of sometimes (Amy, YNP).

In this extract the woman describes the role of orgasm as a signifier, as a communicative tool between partners. However, for her, as for many others, it is a false signifier, one which is difficult and almost impossible to change. Some interviewees also felt that their partners, and men in general, considered women's orgasm as a reflection upon men's sexual performance and their manhood:

For a man to sort of give a woman an orgasm sort of with his penis seems to be the ultimate sort of macho achievement isn't it? I think even though men today they don't think they think like that I think they probably do inside (Mary, MP).

The notion of female orgasm includes not only women's representation of their experiences but also men's representations of the experience as well as women's representation of men. Orgasm is described in this extract as a signifier not only of the woman but also of her partner, his ability and his gender identity. Indeed, women who had problems with orgasm frequently said that their partners took it upon themselves as a mission to be the one that made them come. Others said that they faked orgasm as a way

to avoid the pressure put on them; make their partner feel good and avoid uncomfortable situations:

Interviewee: He thinks it's amazing if I do but he is not worried if I don't.

Sometimes I fake it, just make him feel good about that but...

Interviewer: You think it is important for him?

Interviewer: Sometimes I can kind of engage more. I know if he does that for long time he really wants me to come, and I know that more often I wouldn't so sometimes I just fake it (Gloria, YNP).

This woman does not explicitly say she feels under any pressure to experience orgasm, but it can be interpreted from her faking it. It should be noted that not all women considered men's wish for them to experience orgasm as a form of pressure; some women highly valued this. They considered such a wish as a sign of care and sensitivity:

Interviewee: My husband is not like that, I mean he is not like that. But he is different from most men, he is not the sort of person that would go to a strip club or read 'girly magazine' or whatever. So he is a very sensitive person and he does it because he thinks it should please me whatever been done and I should please him so... there hasn't been once in whole of our life together when I haven't had an orgasm (Felicia, ONP).

Hence, many women considered female orgasm as a signifier of many different things such as their partners' care for them, their gender identities and the quality of their relationship. Women felt that men also saw orgasm as a signifier, even if of other things such as women's enjoyment, men's ability to perform, and men's gender identities. Indeed, the experience of orgasm was described as embracing many different meanings and symbols which were closely related to men's and women's gender identities and relationships.

6.5 Normal and Extreme Experience

Half of the interviewees brought up the facet of normality (see Appendix 7). They described their experience in terms of normality and abnormality, and wondered about the similarity between their experiences and other women's experiences. The theme of normality was related to different aspects of their experiences, such as the quality of their orgasm, the means through which they experienced it, its frequency, multiple orgasms, and mutual orgasm. It was important for women to know that their experiences were normal and shared by others, as they saw it as an indication for being normal. The discussion about the normality of their experiences was usually explicitly or implicitly related to a discussion about their gender identity. For example:

Interviewee: And of course, you know, when you are younger, at the beginning of your sexual activity, you want to see whether what you feel is what the others

feel too, you know, so that you feel you belong. It is also a way of belonging into, like the other, than it's OK.

Interviewer: Belong to?

Interviewee: Belong to the group of women, young women, when you are young, who can have sex, can have orgasm, they are not dysfunctional in anyway. So it all links to being like the norm, like most people. Once you feel that you are different then problems start, you know (Nicole, MNP).

Hence, presence of orgasm is a signifier of normality, of belonging to the 'right group'. Not many women discussed explicitly the feeling of being identified as dysfunctional, but in this extract the woman explicitly discussed the fear of being labelled as such.

Though women wanted to have normal experiences and belong to the 'normal group' they had different ideas about what is normal. Moreover, a number of women held contrary ideas about what was normative. For example:

Interviewee: I cannot have an orgasm without playing my clitoris. You know, which is, I feel quite abnormal, you know.

Interviewer: So it bothers you that in order to experience orgasm you have to play with...

Interviewee: Yea of course it does yea.

Interviewer: Why?

Interviewee: Because a lot of my friends can have sex and then orgasm without doing that (...). I know that some women cannot have orgasms without having clitoris 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?' (Florence, YP).

This extract illustrates an inner conflict in the definition of normality. The woman says that she knows that it is normal to use clitoral manipulation in order to experience orgasm, but that this knowledge was not enough by itself as she still felt abnormal. Hence, entitling this phenomenon as normal is not sufficient in itself, it is its presentation as 'dysfunctional' that renders it problematic. In the following extract the woman suggests a similar explanation:

I think it is quite probable or possible that some women just don't have them [orgasms] but it doesn't feel that it's all right in society to be like that (Eve, MP).

Even when women knew that their experiences were common, their social milieu made them feel problematic and abnormal. Feeling normal was very important for the women. They wanted to know that their experiences were common. They wanted more information. They wanted their experiences "*to be more normalised*" (Sue, MP).

6.5.1 Extreme versus mundane experience

As was illustrated throughout this chapter, many descriptions of orgasm possessed a quality of extreme positive experience, containing very strong adjectives or adverbs. For example:

Having an orgasm is or can be the most profoundly moving and satisfactory combination of the lovemaking experience that one can have. It's an extremely pleasurable surge of feeling that overpowers one's whole being (Hillary, MNP).

The extreme nature of orgasm was mainly described in relation to orgasm as mental or romantic experience, but was also occasionally related to orgasm as a physical experience:

It was the best feeling that my body has ever experienced (Ann, YP).

However, orgasm was also described as a mundane experience, especially in relation to it through masturbation as a functional experience, its function was to help women relax, release tension and go to sleep:

I mean most of the time I tend to, I masturbate quite a lot and so that's something that I do, I don't really think much of that at all I just have done for years and so it is just. (.....) I think nothing really happen I just I orgasm and that's it and usually

it will be in bed so I would just go to sleep straightaway or just be like just to relax me even sometimes before I go to sleep. I know that it will make me relax and its much less intense it is just like an act, just over it and I don't really think about it (Jill, YP).

Orgasm through masturbation bears a different meaning and contains a different function than orgasm through sexual activity. Orgasm becomes a mechanical functional act; it bears the physical aspect only, excluding the emotional and the relational aspects. That is not to say that it is of no importance to women; orgasm through masturbation still plays a role, but a different one.

6.6 Discussion of findings

The chapter presents orgasm as a multi-dimensional experience; physical, emotional and relational. The physical sensation was used in the social construction of orgasm to 'ground' the experience; to link the spiritual experience to the body. The two aspects fortified one another. The physical sensation rendered orgasm a natural, rudimentary experience, yet it did not all come to that; it was much more. This idea was evident as well in women's discussion about the 'need'; the physical need was used to validate their experience, to construct it as something as basic as eating and drinking. However, the experience of orgasm was not constructed as solely physically. This experience was

constructed very differently from eating or sneezing; it was the emotional and the relational aspects that rendered the experience more meaningful.

There was a connection between the construction of the experience, the construction of one's gender identity and the construction of one's relationship. Each of these representations contributed to the relation between the three constructions. The positive emotions were related to long term feelings of femininity and well being. These feelings extended beyond the moment of orgasm and played a part in the way women perceived themselves. Having had orgasms was used to construct an identity of being a woman and of being sexual. It was also related to a general sense of well being; not being moody and uptight, being a more pleasant person. Women who did not experience orgasm were characterised as being less alive, less lucky and less pleasant.

Orgasm was described as a mystical experience. As such it was experienced as connecting to something very deep within oneself, almost the essence of one's being. The connection to one's self was sometimes subsumed by a deep connection to one's partner. Orgasm connected the two partners to one another. This notion was evident both in the representation of orgasm as a mystical experience and as a romantic experience. Again, orgasm was constructed as having a lasting effect beyond the moment itself of prompting one's love to her partner.

The representation of orgasm as a romantic experience and as a deep connection between the two partners was very hard to challenge even when women's experiences did not go

along with this construction. The romantic and the 'mystical' representations of orgasm advocated the experience of orgasm by penetration, 'vaginal orgasm' and mutual orgasms. In addition, reaching orgasm with a partner was constructed as being more meaningful than reaching orgasm by masturbation. This romantic representation also contributed to women's distress for using fantasies and clitoral manipulation. Moreover, it held women back from communicating their needs and wishes and 'being selfish' about their orgasm.

The data reveals how a conflict between different social representations of orgasm is internalised by women and becomes an individual problem, which contributes to women's self-blame. Orgasm was presented both as a natural experience and as an achievement. Women felt abnormal for not experiencing orgasm, yet at the same time blamed themselves for worrying too much about it. Many interviewees tried to challenge the existing construction of orgasm but were left with this internal conflict. This inner-conflict was partly produced by the absence of a different social discourse which could have enabled them to construct orgasm in a more realistic light.

Orgasm was constructed as a loss of control. In that regard, some women mentioned feelings of vulnerability and of being exposed; they felt embarrassed to be seen in a vulnerable position. These difficulties can be related to a contemporary expectation of women to always be in control of how they look and behave. Women were usually shamed to express strong feelings of sexuality and felt they were expected to be in control of their sexuality (Seu, 1998). Moreover, according to Weaver (1999), who explored women's descriptions of the experience of giving birth, many women felt afraid

of yelling and swearing during birth and felt under pressure to behave in a more controlled fashion. Her research provides another example of the common expectation of women to behave in a very controlled manner.

On the other hand, the need not to lose control was also shameful to women as it made them think of themselves as control freaks and as problematic. According to Seu (1998), female sexuality was strongly related to feelings of shame because shame was a way for women to negotiate contradicting positions expected from them. Hence, feelings of shame reported in this research can be understood as a way to negotiate the contradicting representations of orgasm; the loss of control versus that of womanhood as having control.

The findings presented in this chapter follow the lines of previous research, which argues for the existence of a collectively shared representation of female orgasm. Orgasm is seen as a goal that women are expected to achieve in certain situations (Davidson & Moore, 1994; Heath, 1982; Laumann et al., 1994). Like Potts (2000), this study asserts that women attempt to challenge this social representation. In addition to this, the current study also sheds light on the complexity of the social representation of orgasm, and links it to women's self-blame.

Finally, this study supports the Embodiment paradigm. Individuals use the social representations of orgasm as a scale and measure themselves in accordance to this. Not achieving orgasm results in feeling ashamed and guilty, while achieving orgasm regularly

reproduces one's gender identity as a healthy woman. Certainly, women are not passive in the process of formatting their reality and self-formation. They engage, invest and reproduce dominant representations of orgasm as a healthy and natural achievement, and as a signifier of sexual enjoyment. Their partners also play a meaningful part in the process of constructing and reproducing social understandings of orgasm. They are active in the process of formatting women's experiences of it. They take part in this process through their sexual behaviour, and their verbal reactions. Indeed, the findings in the chapter assert that female orgasm derives its meaning through a complex construction which involves both discursive and non-discursive resources.

Overview of Chapter Seven

The chapter examines the interviewees' accounts of their problems with orgasm. It identifies and explores the significant role one's relationship plays in constructing the experience of absence of orgasm as 'problems with orgasm'. It explores the effects of problems with orgasm upon women's emotions, relationships and gender identity. The chapter establishes that much of women's negative experiences are related to the gap between their own experiences and the social representations of the presence and absence of orgasm, and to the perception of sex as goal oriented activity. Finally, it analyses the notion of acceptance by women of their condition.

CHAPTER 7: THE EXPERIENCE OF PROBLEMS WITH ORGASM

7.1 Introduction

The interviewees presented a variety of accounts regarding the effects that problems with orgasm on their lives. The consequences that problems with orgasm had on their lives varied from one woman to another. For some of them, it played a meaningful role in their lives. With others, it was negligible. Women discussed problems with orgasm as an emotional and relational experience. They identified relationships as being the most dominant factor of their experiences of problems. Most women with problems described their partners' reactions as something of great importance to them. The second prevailing theme in the data was 'acceptance'. More than half of the women who identified themselves as having problems, said they accepted their situation. Acceptance was the most recurrent emotion brought up in their descriptions.

7.2 Relationships

7.2.1 Partner's reaction

The relationships between the women and their sexual, and usually romantic, partners played a meaningful role in the interviewee's descriptions of having problems with orgasm. Their relationships were both affected by problems with orgasm and at the same time played a role in shaping these problems.

First, women felt that their relationships were affected by difficulties in experiencing orgasm. They felt that by not reaching an orgasm, they let their partners down. In addition, they were afraid of damaging their partners' self image, manhood and of instigating feelings of insecurity. Hence, not reaching an orgasm created pressures and tension within the relationship:

I must have mentioned it, but I can't think of a time when I have brought the subject up. Because I think it does give men that paranoia that their sexual performance isn't up to scratch, so to speak, and it can cause a lot of arguments and things like that in the relationship (Jill, YP).

This extract demonstrates the notion that problems with orgasm can harm one's relationship and upset one's partner and presents this notion as common sense, a logical idea that does not need to be proven. The interviewee describes her reluctance to talk with men on the subject. She already 'knows' what their emotional reaction to the subject will be. Her 'knowledge' is based mainly on common sense or popular beliefs rather than on experience. This common-sense understanding of men's reaction to problems with orgasm came up a number of times, for example when women praised their partners in comparison with the 'average' man:

It could be worse and I have a very patient husband. Other men would run away and find a younger model by now. (Lily, OP)

Problems with orgasm influenced one's relationship since they were presented as a cause for difficulties for men and as a probable reason for the men to leave their partners.

Second, women's experiences of problems with orgasm were strongly influenced by their partners' reaction to their situation. For example, in the following extract, the woman defined herself as having problems with orgasm mainly as a result of her partner's reaction:

Interviewee: For myself I associate orgasm with probably more to do with touching and oral sex rather than intercourse because I have never had an orgasm through intercourse, only through other means. So I think that is what I meant when I said I have problems with orgasms, so I think that kind of fills your criteria.

Interviewer: It's how you feel about it...

Interviewee: Yes, it seems a problem to me because I don't know, the man seems to be, my boyfriend seems to be worried about how I feel. When we are having sex he is worried that I am bored (Daryl, YP).

In this extract the woman describes her boyfriend's worries as her main reason for defining herself as having problems with orgasm. Later in the interview, she mentions previous relationships where she did not define herself as having problems with orgasms:

It didn't use to bother me because I have always been in quite loving long term relationships where, you know, sex isn't just, you know, sex, isn't just intercourse, it's lots of different kinds of lovemaking so it didn't bother me so much (Daryl, YP).

In the two extracts, the woman presents the way in which her relationships influence her understanding of having problems with orgasm. It appears that her definition of problems with orgasm is influenced not just by her partners' reactions and feelings towards her experience of orgasm, but also by her partners' behaviour. In previous relationships, where sexual encounters habitually included different forms of sex, she experienced orgasms. In the present relationship, where sexual encounters seem to mainly consist of penetrative sex and where her partner reacts negatively to the fact that she does not experience orgasm, she defines her experiences as problematic. Hence, her partners' emotional reactions and their physical sexual activities construct her definition of having problems with orgasm.

Although there seems to be a common understanding of how men react to problems with orgasm, the interviewees in fact state a large variety of reactions. For many, their problems are augmented due to their partners' disappointment of their inability to experience orgasm. In more extreme cases, their partners put them down and offended them on account of their problems, as is described in the following extract:

I have had a lot of very subtle psychological sort of bullying making me feel as if I am inadequate (...) He [my husband] said to me so many times 'women are meant to enjoy intercourse' like the intercourse bit, the penetrative bit, he said 'why don't you enjoy?' (Rose, MNP)

Here, the woman describes her partner's subtle harassment. Her husband's unawareness of the low occurrence of female orgasm through penetration constructs his view of his wife and consequently her view of herself. He defines her as problematic, and she accepts his definition as later in the interview she discusses her image of herself as non-sexual because she only achieves orgasm through manual stimulation.

Other experiences were presented, such as in which partners reacted very positively, trying to be helpful and supportive, in which the couple bought vibrators together, or others, in which orgasm was legitimately experienced not through penetration. For example:

We have tried, my husband is a very patient man and we bought vibrators, which certainly gives me more sensation, but I don't think they are terribly good for him because he is kind of left out of the process. So I think, I don't think it was a bad thing to get a vibrator from my point of view. But I don't think it helped in our physical relationship all that much except that it takes some of the pressure off him, because he was trying so hard to get me climax and, nothing (Lily, OP).

The woman describes how together as a couple they explored ways to overcome her absence of orgasm. It was important for both of them to find a way for her to experience orgasm. However, she states that although they overcame this difficulty, this in itself did not solve their problem. She is worried that the use of the vibrator created a new problem, whereby her partner felt excluded. The solution in the physical sexual level was not sufficiently enough to solve other problems in the relational aspect. The romantic construction of the female orgasm and its construction as an indicator of male sexual ability created a new problem even if the absence of orgasm itself was solved.

A number of women stressed the importance of communication between partners as the most important factor in overcoming their difficulties. As one woman described:

Sometimes it just would not happen and I could, I would then sometimes get upset. And we talked about it and decided that the best thing to do was just let things go if it didn't happen it didn't and not to keep trying and hoping. And that has proved the best way for us it relaxed us both and helped us (Renee, OP).

The interviewee describes a different way to manage the absence of female orgasm within the relationship, together, the two partners redefined their expectations in accordance to her ability to experience orgasm.

7.2.2 'De motivation' for sex

A number of interviewees said that the absence of orgasm reduced their motivation to have sex. Indeed, sex drive came up as another element in the construction of problems with orgasm as a relational experience. For example:

I mean I am not in a sexual relationship, haven't been for long time, even though I am married, I stopped doing it with my husband because it was just wasn't worth it, wasn't worth doing it for me. So I haven't had sex for a long time but I am capable of masturbating if I feel the need and I will do because I know what to do and how to do it (...) I never ever had an orgasm with him it just wasn't going to work (Ursula, MP).

The woman describes the absence of orgasm as an important factor in her decision to put an end to their sexual relationship. It was not the only reason, yet, for her, as well as for other interviewees, the absence of orgasm was experienced as an important factor in reducing their sexual drive.

De-motivation towards having sex was not only a problem in itself, but also introduced further difficulties and tensions to the relationship, as presented in the following extract:

So the fact that I know that if I say no to him it makes him very unhappy it means that I try not to say no to him so I am doing something I don't necessarily want to

do in order to keep him happy. So that's the only effect it [problem with orgasm] has (Lily, OP).

In this extract, the woman describes the difficulties of negotiating the sexual relationship with her husband. Her experiences of orgasm as well as her sexual drive have decreased over the years. However, she continues to have sexual encounters with her husband in order not to hurt him. Again, it is her relationship that plays a significant role in her experiences of problem with orgasm; it is the discrepancy in the level of desire to have sex between the two partners that constructs her absence of orgasm as a problem. In her interview she described her ways of dealing with their situation; her means were non-discursive: she either had sex with her partner to please him or avoided any physical contact to eliminate the possibility that her partner would initiate a sexual encounter.

In conclusion, interviewees described ways in which the absence of orgasm influenced their relationship and ways in which their partners influenced their experiences and understandings of the absence of orgasm. These ways included both discursive and non-discursive means.

7.3 Emotional Experience

7.3.1 Negative emotions linked to problems with orgasm

Approximately half of the interviewees linked problems with orgasm to negative emotions (see appendix 8). A number of women described feelings of frustration and

anger at times when they did not experience orgasm. These feelings appeared to be something between a physical and an emotional experience:

I do find it intensely frustrating. I do really feel sometimes that I desperately need to achieve the release of orgasm. And when I can't and can't and can't and I keep getting there and getting there and getting there and then it comes off because my mind is busy doing its own thing that really bugs me, really makes me furious sometimes [laughing] if I just cannot do it (Leah, MP).

The woman describes the feelings of frustration and anger as related to the notion of orgasm, which she regards as a need and as a physical release. Yet, these feelings of frustration are related not only to the notions of orgasm as fulfilling a physical need, but also to the notion of orgasm as the goal of the sexual act, something that one should work towards. She is furious with 'her mind' for stopping her body from experiencing orgasm, and is frustrated since her mind failed her. This concept of absence of orgasm as a frustrating experience cannot be detached from the notion of orgasm as a goal or achievement:

...but it is a little bit annoying and irritating, frustrating, if you try to have one [orgasm] and you can't, because it's like running up a hill backwards or something. But generally it doesn't bother me that much, no (Edna, YNP).

The feelings of frustration and anger, as described in this extract, are closely linked to the representation of orgasm as the goal of the sexual act. Her metaphor of running up a hill is a goal-oriented metaphor, in which the experience of orgasm is represented by the desire to reach the summit of the hill, and the absence of orgasm is represented the notion of running backwards.

Although anger was a recurrent theme, it was directed towards different people. Some women admitted feeling angry both with their partners and with themselves:

The men who have orgasms, you feel like, they do and I don't so it seems a bit unfair, unequal. I think you can easily feel inadequate (...) I think at times I got a bit resentful at the fact like angry even though I wasn't doing anything to help myself like by pretending that I was having orgasm. That was a really stupid thing to do (...) I think I felt that they owed me orgasms, they should give me one but I don't think you can really do that (Irene, YNP).

The anger is directed towards her male partners who did not give her orgasms and towards herself for being 'stupid' and not giving herself orgasms. Another woman discussed her anger against all other women who did not have problems and who experience orgasm, but then the feeling of anger was replaced by the feeling of sadness:

I still feel, I am still terribly sad that I have never had the experience. I don't feel angry any more but I feel terribly sad (...). I feel that there is a huge experience

other people have that inspires people to write things and you know make the most dreadful mistakes in their lives because it is so wonderful and I have never had it and I feel really that I have been denied something. If I could have three wishes that would be right up the top probably before winning the lottery (Eve, MP).

The interviewee describes feelings of sadness and of 'missing out'. Whilst never experiencing orgasm, she relies upon social images of orgasm and consequently imagines this extreme experience that is denied her. Like her, a number of women discussed the feelings of missing out on something that other people experience. The gap identified and the comparisons held between their experiences and the experiences they assumed others had also created feelings of inadequacy and embarrassment in social situations:

I used to get more worried about it. I still talked to my friends about sex and stuff quite a lot but I sometimes felt embarrassed because I didn't necessary feel like I was having the same experience as them (Jane, YNP).

The interviewee mentions feelings of inadequacy which occur in social occasions, when she and her friends discuss their sexual experiences. Similarly, other interviewees brought up the notion of inadequacy, which was interlinked to the feelings of being less sexual or less feminine in comparison to other women:

So all these years it's always been manual stimulation but also not... I felt I just felt I was half a, looking back in retrospective I just felt I wasn't a sexy person. So

it was, I felt that I was like half a person I just, whether I had a hormone deficiency or just not a sexy person I don't know (Rose, MNP).

The feelings of inadequacy were derived from the gap that existed between their subjective experiences and the experiences they thought other women had. These feelings were also related to the common understandings of reasons for absence of orgasm. The last interviewee mentioned during the interview, that two and a half years prior to the interview she was placed on HRT (hormone replacement therapy). Since then, she has been able to experience orgasm via vaginal penetration. In addition, she has had a higher sexual drive and has enjoyed sex much more. Currently, she feels that her past problems with orgasm and sexuality have been influenced by a hormone deficiency. This is in contrast to her view on the subject prior to the use of HRT, during which she reasoned the absence of orgasm with not being a sexual person. As was discussed in chapter 5, there was indeed an unvoiced assumption that in the absence of a physical explanation for problems with orgasm, such problems were connected with one's gender identity. Hence, the gap between one's experiences and the social representations of other women's experiences, in addition to not knowing the reason for this discrepancy, created feelings of inadequacy and embarrassment for women and influenced their gender identity.

Few women said that not understanding the reasons for their state gave rise to negative emotions, for example:

It did worry me because I was worried about what was wrong with me (Molly, YP).

Hence, women used the absence of orgasm as an indication of whether there was something 'wrong' with them. Being worried, as this woman describes, or being embarrassed or feeling inadequate were all implications of the gap between one's own experiences and one's social representation of the 'normal' experience.

7.3.2 Acceptance

More than half of the women with problems said they accepted their condition to some degree; they were either relatively unconcerned with their condition or that they have learned to come to terms with it. They described different strategies devised to minimise the negative implications connected with having problems with orgasm, one of which was to argue against its representation as something which plays a meaningful role in their lives:

I don't know really, I don't spend a lot of time worrying about it or thinking that...
Maybe that is to do with my job as well because I just know that, you know, your sex life is something that changes so much (Molly, YP)

The interviewee describes how her social environment, working as a sexual health youth worker, taught her that 'sex life' is a fluid concept. Putting her problems in context, as

being part of the changing nature of sex and sexuality, helped her to come to terms with her condition. Other women said that their condition played a minor role in their life as a whole. Contextualising their problems with orgasm helped them minimise the negative implications of social comparison:

My life, I have enjoyed almost to the full, and if that the only bit of it that isn't, then you know its too late now anyway to do anything about it. But you know we are all different and different people experience different things, different levels of intensity in different ways (Robin, OP).

It would appear that like others, this interviewee compares her experiences to the social representation of female orgasm. She describes her own sexual experiences as different and less intense. She distances herself from this comparison, looking at the general context of her life, and asserting that it is normal to find differences in different people. Others as well reduced the effect of absence of orgasm on their lives by putting it in the context of their lives as a whole:

It's not terribly important to me I think, I think I can go for weeks without having an orgasm. There are so many other things on my mind, there are so many things to do so it doesn't play a very big part of my life I don't think (Mary, MP).

It is evident from this extract that orgasm is not a major issue for the interviewee. Contrary to the social representation of female orgasm, which places high importance

upon this experience, she states that it is insignificant for her. That said, the interviewee is however ambiguous about the importance of orgasm; at the beginning of the interview she explicitly adhered to social representation of orgasm, which emphasises its importance to women:

Well I think nowadays it [orgasm] is considered a lot more important particularly for women. I think perhaps years ago it, I mean I remember that I used to hear women saying that they didn't have orgasms with their partners and they didn't mind they said they didn't mind. Whereas, I don't think anybody today would say that anyway no woman would say that. (...) I think there is a lot of pressure from magazines for women to have orgasms whereas before there wasn't and if they didn't have any they kidded themselves that they don't mind. So I think perhaps all women think it's important (Mary, MP).

The consideration of both extracts together presents an inner conflict. On the one hand, the interviewee says that it is socially unacceptable to define orgasm as unimportant. The last extract shows an internalisation of these social norms as she criticises women for '*kidding themselves*' that the absence of orgasm is not a problem. On the other hand, as put forward in the second to last extract, she describes her own acceptance of absence of orgasm and says that for her, orgasm is not very important. It seems that both sides co-exist and play a role in her experiences. The two extracts should be understood as representing her experience. This analysis does not assume that one extract negates the other, or that one extract represents her true feelings while the other is a pretence. Rather,

the analysis of the two extracts together suggests that there exists an inner-conflict. Indeed, most interviewees who defined themselves as having problems with orgasm discussed both the feelings of acceptance and the emotional and relational difficulties.

The notion of acceptance of absence of orgasm did not always come as a protest to social representation. Some women described the need to come to terms with the absence of orgasm as part of the 'be-all-and-end-all' argument presented previously in chapter six; the notion that if a woman aimed too strongly towards achieving orgasm, she would reduce her chances of experiencing one. For example:

Well, first time I didn't really care, the second time it really worried me, and now, well I mean, just accept it. I mean it will be nice to have orgasms more often but if you tried too hard you are not going to have any at all (June, MP).

In this extract orgasm is constructed as a goal and coming to terms with its absence is constructed as a mean towards this goal. Hence, coming to terms with absence of orgasm should not always be analysed as an attempt to resist the social understanding of the importance of female orgasm. Instead, can be viewed as playing a part in its construction.

7.4 Looking for help

Only four women acknowledged having sought professional assistance to increase the frequency of experiencing orgasms. Three of them turned to books and guides and the fourth went once to a counsellor. Two of them said it was not useful:

Interviewee: I did go when I was younger and got some sort of sex counselling ... try, you know, to work towards having orgasm at penetrative sex. But it didn't really work (...) there was somebody there who tried, I can't remember what she did now, she gave me exercises, you know things to try and...

Interviewer: Positions?

Interviewee: Yes

Interviewer: And it didn't work?

Interviewee: No it didn't work (Mary, MP).

One woman did find advices about positions helpful:

I was 50 before I had my first one, I think we were technically, we hadn't read anything and then I knew a psychologist, who recommended a book. I think it was called something like 'sex manners for advanced purpose'. And that gave us all sort of ideas, as I said I was 50 by this time and that what really started it we have found out 'oh this is what you do' you know [laughing] (Renee, OP).

Both women explained that what they sought after was additional information regarding sexual positions, rather than emotional support. Other women claimed that there were insufficient information resources for women to turn to:

For women there isn't any help. No advices anywhere, no support anywhere – especially if you don't want to go to the GP. Because you know your GP has lots to do and important things to do and he has got people with real problems and illnesses to see, not something that most people would be inclined to bother their GP with, because it's not strictly a medical condition or a medical worry (Chloe, YP).

This extract indicates that some women sense that problems with orgasm are not 'real problems' and that this subject is taboo. The woman feels uncomfortable to discuss the issue with her GP, and is left isolated, without having anyone or any resource to turn to. Those feelings of isolation were elaborated in chapter five.

One should be attentive to the small number of interviewees who sought professional advice. None of the interviewees acknowledged ever attending therapy or marital counselling. One must also take into consideration the 'taboo' nature of this subject. One woman who defined herself as having problems with orgasm, emphasised during the interview her acceptance of her condition, acknowledging to some emotional difficulties, and described her partner as very supportive. A day after the interview, she sent the interviewer an email in which she offered a depiction different to the one she presented in

the interview; she wrote about a period during which she had low sex drive and did not have orgasm, a period during which there were difficulties in her relationship. This is an extract from her email:

About 18 months ago I went off having intercourse (...). My husband and I usually have a very touchy feely relationship, but I began to feel under pressure to have sex, so that when he touched me I felt he was molesting me. When I complained his response was that I wouldn't like it if he didn't fancy me any more. My unvoiced reply was, Oh yes I would, because then he would leave me alone. But I was worried that if I didn't respond that eventually he might find someone else who would, and that he might fall in love with them. This put more pressure on me and made me feel even less like having intercourse. When we did have intercourse, I would do everything I knew would make him come to orgasm quickly, to get it over with as soon as possible. I certainly wasn't having orgasms.

(June, MP)

Unlike other women, she did not look for help regarding technical issues such as the different sexual positions, but rather she looked for emotional help; how to deal with her relationship and with both her emotions and those of her partner. She suggested that one would look for external assistance only in extreme circumstances or desperation. The suggestion itself, and taking into consideration the fact that she acknowledged to having such difficulties only subsequent to the interview, implies that there is a strong taboo concerning the notion of seeking for help. The email advocates a new understanding of

women's acceptance of their condition, and of the avoidance of seeking professional help. It presents the notion of acceptance in that context as part of social norms and taboo.

7.5 Discussion of findings

The findings of this chapter, regarding the experience of having problems with orgasm, coincide with the findings of the previous chapter regarding the experience of orgasm itself. The previous chapter reveals that many of the interviewees see orgasm as an extreme experience from different aspects: emotional, intimate, mystical and physical. This backdrop brings into relief the emotions of 'missing out' and anger that are outlined in this chapter regarding the experience of problems with orgasm. Similarly, the previous chapter presents orgasm as a normal and a natural experience, as well as the object of men's desire. These representations are linked to the analysis held in this chapter on the influences problems with orgasm have on women's gender identity.

One's relationship and one's partner play a most meaningful role in shaping one's experiences of problems with orgasm. The dominance of the partner's reaction sheds light on the social construction of problems with orgasm. Indeed, in common with Jackson and Scott's (2001) theory, the macro social understanding of orgasms and problem with orgasms are manifested, reworked and embodied in the micro level, i.e. one's relationship. These interviews voice mainly the discursive element of the social construction of problems with orgasm, but women discuss also the embodied non-

discursive practices in their relationships which take part in the social construction of their experiences. Their partners' emotional and discursive reactions together with their physical sexual practices establish the interviewees' experiences and understanding of absence of orgasm. Moreover, women's ways of coping with problems with orgasm are partly non-discursive in their nature, for example, the use of a vibrator, the avoidance of physical contact or the including of non-penetrative sex in the sexual encounters.

Approximately half of the women asserted that having problems with orgasm was connected with having negative emotions. They talked about feelings of anger, sadness of 'missing out' and frustration. They also talked about feelings of inadequacy, of being less sexual or less feminine in comparison to other women. Much of their negative experiences were related to the gap between their own experiences and the social representations of presence and absence of orgasm, and to the perception of sex as goal oriented. Continuous to existing feminist literature, this research argues for the existence of impossible cultural norms regarding women's bodies, which result in feelings of shame and guilt for women (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993).

However, together with the discussion of negative emotions and difficulties in relationships, a large number of the interviewees also brought up the notion of acceptance. The three themes co-exist in many of the interviews with women who defined themselves as having problems with orgasms. Many women stressed that they have come to terms with their problems and had less negative emotions regarding their situation. They described an employment of different strategies to minimise the negative

experiences. It is possible to understand their discourse on acceptance as a way to resist the 'knowledge cycle' as described by Nicolson (1993). Nicolson attempts to explain the ways women collude in their own pathologisation. This research found that women indeed do so while simultaneously also partly try to resist their own pathologisation.

In order to make sense of their own experiences, women draw upon the existing social representation of female orgasm even when these representations are different to their own experiences and create difficulties for them. Influenced by their partners' reaction and the existing social representation they define themselves as problematic and non-sexual because they do not reach orgasm regularly or by penetration. Though not commonly voiced they link these experiences to their gender identity and represent absence of orgasm as unwomanly. Notwithstanding, this chapter presents the strategies interviewees utilise to resist the negative implications connected with the social representation of female orgasm. The strategies that they employ are personal in the sense that they attempt to come to terms with their own experiences. By contextualising their experiences they argue against the importance given to the female orgasm. Together with their partners they explore ways to manage their situation, either by finding means to reach orgasm or by redefining absence of orgasm as a non-problem.

The recurrent reference to acceptance can be seen as an attempt to resist the 'knowledge cycle', yet it can also be seen as a collaboration with the current taboo around problems with orgasms. Their notion of acceptance can be linked to adherence to prevailing cultural norms, which do not support the sense of 'feeling sorry for oneself', or going to personal or marital therapy. The relatively minimal discussion on the negative aspects of

problems with orgasm can be seen as fulfilling a social function in the isolation of women who experience absence of orgasm. By not acknowledging the difficulties they continue the isolation of women in their experiences of absence of orgasm and overlook the negativity in the current social representation of female orgasm.

Indeed, this chapter reveals an unsolved conflict between the maintenance of the current construction and resistance to it. Many women present such an inner-conflict in their attempt to resist their own pathologisation while trying to make sense of their experiences within the prevailing social representations and social practice.

Overview of Chapter Eight

The chapter compares between the findings of the interview-based study and those of the media analysis. The first part presents an assemblage of the findings of the two studies. It analyses the female orgasm and problems concerning it as represented by the interviewees and by the media, and examines the similarities and differences between the two. The second part of the chapter reflects upon the research process, in keeping with feminist literature and the symbolic interactionist position. The third part discusses the findings of the three research questions. Finally, it identifies the limitations of the thesis, its implications and possible areas for future research.

CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

8.1 Comparison of findings between the interview based study and the media analysis

8.1.1 Representations of presence and absence of orgasm

There was a great similarity between lay and media representations of orgasm. Orgasm was presented both by the interviewees and by women's magazines as a physical, natural and healthy experience. The representation was related to orgasm as a biological bodily event in a normal sexual human interaction. In addition, it presented orgasm as a valuable experience with a long lasting influence upon one's well being.

The concept of orgasm as a healthy experience with long lasting positive effects was also related to its representation as a mental experience in both the interviews' and in the media discussion of orgasm. Orgasm was presented by both as emotional and spiritual, although it was more dominant at the interviewees. The interviewees more frequently viewed orgasm as a spiritual experience, a deep authentic expression of the self, while women's magazines gradually put more accents on the physical representation. The interviewees brought up the intimate romantic aspects of orgasm more frequently than the magazines, but both represented female orgasm as important to the partner. Indeed, both highlighted the importance of orgasm to the relationship and constructed orgasm as a relational event and as a bonding experience.

The theme of orgasm as an 'out of control' experience was more recurrent among the interviewees than in the media coverage. The experience in that sense was physical, emotional and relational. The loss of control was associated with noises and visual elements of the experience of orgasm that were seen or heard by others. These aural and visual signs were regarded as a positive behaviour by both the media and the interviewees, although some interviewees emphasised their reluctance to be seen in a situation where they lost control or were vulnerable. This discrepancy could be interpreted in the context of social representation of femininity in the Western society: Women are expected to behave in a more controlled fashion and to be in control of their sexuality. Hence, the interviewees' feelings of shame could be understood as a way to negotiate the contradicting expectations from them (Seu, 1998).

Orgasm was represented by both the interviewees and the women's magazines as extreme and out of the ordinary, but at the same time as common. Both sources also presented orgasm as a functional act, and more specifically, as a means of relaxation. The interviewees differed from the magazines in that some of them referred to orgasm also as a trivial activity. The two opposite representations, that of the triviality and that of the extremity, frequently co-existed in the interviews. The representations of orgasm as trivial and functional were usually brought up when referring to orgasm by masturbation, whereas the representation of orgasm as extreme was usually brought up when referring to orgasm by intercourse.

In both the interviews and the magazines, there was a similar discussion around orgasm as the 'be-all-and-end-all' of the sexual act. The representation of orgasm as the goal of sex was frequent in both, and as such was related to a notion of an achievement that needed to be worked towards. Metaphors such as 'marathon', 'working', and 'triumph' were recurrent. Paradoxically, at the same time, both sources argued against the notion of orgasm as the goal of sex, in particular against orgasm as the 'be-all-and-end-all' of sex. The predominant thread of the argument was that seeing orgasm as such ignored other pleasurable aspects of sex and could have had a negative effect on one's partner since it put him under the pressure to perform. In addition, it was frequently argued that giving too much attention to orgasm reduced women's chances to experience orgasm; it was claimed that one could reach orgasm when relaxing, thus if one would have been too preoccupied with it, it would have had the opposite effect on her. The findings of this research showed that the argument against orgasm as the 'be-all-and-end-all' of sex finally did not challenge the social representation of orgasm as a goal, rather reinforced it; though both the interviewees and the magazines discussed the increased pressure put on women to experience orgasm and the negative implications it had, they both took part in creating this pressure through constructing and re-constructing the social representation of orgasm.

This contradiction contributed to the construction of blame and negative image of women. *Cosmopolitan* attached a negative image on women who aimed too strongly towards orgasm, describing them as immature and non-feminine, and blaming them for threatening on their partners' manhood. The interviewees also blamed themselves for

being selfish and took the responsibility for reducing their own ability to experience orgasm, whilst at the same time they felt abnormal if they did not experience one.

The romantic, mystical and natural representations of orgasm advocated the experience of orgasm by penetration and mutual orgasms, and thus contributed to women's feelings of discomfort for using fantasies, clitoral manipulation and masturbation. The magazines encouraged women to masturbate but their underlying attention was to make them transfer the self-knowledge to a sexual activity with a partner. Orgasm was graded from less to more meaningful, where orgasm through masturbation was in the bottom of the scale and mutual orgasms were in the top of it.

In summary, the interviewees and the media presented very similar representations of orgasm. In addition, both placed the blame and the responsibility on women for experiencing or not experiencing orgasm, and put pressure on women to achieve orgasm. The difference between the two sources was that the interviewees stressed certain representations while the media highlighted others. Women more frequently discussed orgasm as a romantic experience and as a loss of control, while women's magazines more frequently discussed the physical representation of orgasm. Another difference derived from the reference to the visual and aural signs of female orgasm; though these signs were generally presented in a positive manner by both entities, some women also attached uncomfortable feelings, such as shame and fear.

8.1.2 Representation of problems with orgasm

Both the interviewees and the women's magazines presented the absence of orgasm during a sexual act as a normal event, but at the same time they regarded it as a failure on the part of the individual women. Albeit the high frequency of the phenomenon, both data sets constructed it as a problem rather than set it as a norm. Some interviewees expressed their desire for a shift in the social representation so that this phenomenon would be normalised, since in the current situation, which affixed the cultural taboo, they felt isolated. Indeed, the media analysis found that over the years there were manifold discussions of ways to increase the number and quality of women's orgasm. However, this discussion of the meaning of problems and their consequences has decreased in women's magazines in recent years.

Both the interviewees and the magazines presented problems with orgasm as emotional and relational. The problems gave rise to negative emotions, such as frustration, sadness, feelings of 'missing out' and inadequacy. It also disseminated tension in one's relationship and it was suggested that relationships could fail because of it.

Women's magazines placed the responsibility for experiencing orgasm on women, but also blamed them for having negative emotions: feeling inadequate and uncomfortable. Unlike the magazines, the interviewees frequently described feelings of acceptance with their problems with orgasm. There are two possible explanations for this difference: First, women's magazines promote their sales with slogans such as 'how to experience an

orgasm'; it is in their interest that women would not feel at ease with their condition and would then seek for the magazine's advice. Second, social norms are such that women feel blame for having negative emotions regarding absence of orgasm. They thus choose to communicate that they accept their condition, so as to avoid presenting themselves in a negative light.

In summary, both data sets shared the same views on problems with orgasm as an emotional and a relational event which is shared by many women, but which symbolises a failure of the individual. They differed in their views on whether women should come to terms with their condition, as was argued by the interviewees, or challenge it, as was argued by the magazines.

8.1.3 Explanations for presence and absence of orgasm

There was an overlap between the interviewees and the magazines' reasoning of absence and presence of orgasm. However, interviewees suggested two additional explanations, not identifiable in women's magazines, which were the inherent characteristics of women and their partners' sexual behaviour.

The magazines' underlying message was that every woman is capable of experiencing orgasm and that women should take responsibility for their personal experiences of orgasm. While the magazines' explanations for presence and absence of orgasm were usually simplified and included quick physical and verbal solutions for addressing

absence of orgasm, interviewees came up with more varied explanations. In common with Nicolson and Burr (2003), this research found that women acknowledged external factors as their history of sexual experiences and the existing gender inequality in heterosexual relations as an influence on their sexual encounter. Notwithstanding, most interviewees also offered self-blaming explanations, e.g. focusing too strongly on orgasm. Physiological explanations were also offered. The unvoiced assumption was that that in the absence of a physiological explanation for problems with orgasm, such problems were associated with being non-sexual or not sexual enough. Interviewees felt they could not be blamed for a physiological failure, and therefore they preferred using this ground which took the blame away from them.

Two additional assumptions were brought up by the interviewees only: The first dissociated the blame from the woman and oriented the absence and presence of orgasm with one's partner, discussing his sexual skills and his willingness to help a woman to orgasm. Second, some interviewees claimed that their condition is an innate and thus unchangeable. This assumption irrefutably related problems of orgasm to one's identity, but it could also be understood as a defence against the never-ending chase after the desirable orgasm, as women's ticket out of the race.

Interviewees brought up feelings of frustration arising from the gap between their own experiences and the media's instantaneous solutions to problems with orgasm. They described enduring efforts which were fruitless and difficulties to initiate a communication channel concerning their wishes and needs in sexual relationships. This

holding back is caused by internal and external factors, such as one's past experience, social norms, symbols of sex and femininity.

In summery, the interviewees and the women's magazines held overlapping standpoints regarding the reasoning of absence and presence of orgasm. They stated four grounds: emotional, physiological, relational, and knowledge and activity. The interviewees added two additional grounds: one's partner's willingness and performance and one's inherent nature.

8.2 Reflexivity

This thesis recognises that meanings are negotiated within a social context in keeping with feminist literature (Speer, 2002) and the symbolic interactionist position (Smith, 1995), and assumes that the role of the researcher in exploring representations, experiences and meanings is an interpretative one. The researcher attempts to get close to the participants' personal world, however, this can never be done directly or achieved completely; it will always depend upon the researcher's internal world. Hence, the research will always be a process of interpretative nature (Smith et al., 1997). This position acknowledges the local context which is inherent in all the knowledge production, and does not assume that there is only one way to accurately represent a particular phenomenon (Bower, 2000). It is not possible to move beyond such subjectivity, and thus rather than to treat it as an obstacle it is best to acknowledge the

subjectivity and explore its place in the data. As Harris (1996) suggested, self-reflexivity is about:

“giving up the arrogance of scientific objectivity, the unchallenged ‘truth’ of one’s own perspective, the anonymity of the researcher and instead acknowledging one’s own ‘place’: background, expectations, reservations, shortcomings and agenda” (p. 154).

Reflexivity refers to researchers reflecting on their own role in the production of knowledge (Doherty, 1994). It stands for self awareness and recognition of how the researchers’ identities, interests and values impact on the research (Ashmore, 1989). It can never be objective or complete (Yardley, 1997). In the following section I explore my personal influence on this research, the limitations of the research and directions for future research, through a discussion of some of the dilemmas I experienced and the decisions I made throughout the research process.

8.2.1 Research question

My influence begins in the choice and definition of the research subject. As a feminist, I am interested in women's experiences, and I believe that issues related to sex bring into focus important characteristics of the relations between women and men in a patriarchal society (Segal, 1987). Thus, my wider interests together with my disciplinary affiliations as a psychologist and the fact that orgasm is under-researched in the domain of sexual health psychology led me to my thesis topic. My other motive for this research is

personal: I define myself as having difficulties with orgasm and recognise my own sense of shame in identifying myself as having this problem. This self-knowledge informed my curiosity about women's experiences of orgasm, led me to focus on women's difficulties in such experiences, and constructed my criticism of the definition of inorgasmic and preorgasmic women⁴. As such I acknowledge that I may have been more sympathetic with certain interviewees and certain data.

8.2.2 Sample design for the interviews-based aspect of the research

The age division of the sample interviewed was mainly designed to examine the effects of the feminist-sexual revolution on the social representations of female orgasm and on women's private experiences of their sexuality. The choice was influenced by the literature review, which discussed the major impacts of this event on the construction of female orgasm. However, since this research was not held on real-time, if there were differences in the attitudes of the three age groups, they have been assimilated; the research establishes that three decades after the revolution the three generations hold very similar views. This finding is of much interest as it portrays the communality of the social representation of orgasm for women. Yet it leaves open questions regarding orgasm before the feminist-sexual revolution, and the impact of this event on the representations of orgasm and women's experiences.

⁴ This criticism is influenced by past experience of being identified as a preorgasmic woman and my objection to such a definition which defines a woman and not an experience or condition. Personally, I would rather say that I have difficulties with orgasm than that I am inorgasmic.

It would have been perhaps better to set an older age to the 'oldest' age group, but after further thoughts and consultation I decided they would be less willing to be interviewed on that subject. Indeed, it was more difficult to recruit women of the 'oldest' age group than of any other age group. Consequently, the age difference between the youngest in the 'oldest' age group and the oldest in the 'middle' age group is only 5 years. Future research may address different age groups with a wider age gap, for example women in their early twenties and women in their late sixties, as a greater diversity in social, historical and life time dimensions might produce different findings. It is also possible to carry out longitudinal research, which can explore the possible changing nature of the social representation of orgasm (Bauer & Gaskell, 1999).

Those who put themselves forward from the 'oldest' age group may have been atypical regarding relationships, sexuality and sexual problems, in comparison to the average woman in that age. Indeed, it is possible that this was the reason for the similarity found between this age group and the other two groups. According to Catania et al. (1990), volunteers for sex research are more liberal, sexually permissive and curious in comparison to non-volunteers. This might be especially true for the 'oldest' age group (Stuart-Hamilton, 2000). However, since the topics explored in the interviews were very intimate, it was necessary to rely on volunteers for such interviews (Nicolson & Burr, 2003). Very little research, especially qualitative research (Forester, 2002), has been done on this age group in relation to sex in general (Schlesinger, 1996) and orgasm in particular (Rosen et al., 1993). Moreover, as a qualitative study, this study did not intend to draw generalisations or predictions from the data.

The sample design is based not only on age differences but also on the distinction between those who define themselves as experiencing problems with orgasm and those who do not. I chose to base the criteria upon women's self-definition of problems with orgasm since I was interested in women's subjective experiences. Yet the findings reveal no clear-cut difference between the two groups. Many of the women who defined themselves as not having problems with orgasm acknowledged past periods where they did experience problems with orgasm, others acknowledged having difficulties at the time when the interviews took place, but did not define themselves as belonging to the 'problems' group.

In number of cases, women who identified themselves over the initial phone conversation as having problems with orgasm changed their identification in the questionnaire distributed after the completion of the interview. Throughout the research, I realised that during the interview I could not predict what an interviewee would write in the questionnaire regarding the question of self-definition of having problems with orgasm. This finding illustrated the nature of problems with orgasm as fluid rather than stable and emphasised the contextual nature of these experiences. Understanding problems with orgasm as fluid and changeable over time redirects the emphasis from the individualistic, biological understanding of problems with orgasm into one which takes into account relational and social circumstances. Absence of orgasm in certain situations is experienced differently by different women and in different social frameworks. The social circumstances that shape women's subjective definitions of problems with orgasm could be researched further.

The shift in one's self-definition regarding having or not having problems with orgasm should be understood in the methodological context. It may be that in light of the stigma attached to that definition, women felt uncomfortable defining themselves as such. However, I could not circumvent this self-presentation problem since I did not want to categorise women according to a-priori definitions.

8.2.3 Sample size in the interview-based component

This research is based on a relatively large sample for a qualitative methodology (Britten, 1995). Indeed, the large number of interviews facilitated the sub-division of the sample design into six groups, and took into account the diversity of the experiences. The size of the sample influenced the method of data analysis. It can be argued that the unique life stories and the evolution of each interview were lost (Boyatzis, 1998) and that it fragmented the data and neglected the whole (Howllway & Jefferson, 2000). However, different methods of analysis, such as narrative analysis and discourse analysis, have different aims and produce different data. I believe that by conducting and reading each interview thoroughly and in a repetitive manner, I was able to identify the main issues that emerged from the data. The aim of this analysis was to describe and identify themes that are valid and meaningful across many participants and to produce a mixture of systems and of complex nature (Joffe & Yardley, in press).

Unfortunately, I was unable to present all the issues and themes that emerged from the analysis, such as narratives about the first experiences of orgasm, because of the volume and density of material. Moreover, throughout the research I wondered whether I should

include a number of case studies. For example, I thought it might be interesting to present case studies of the women who have never experienced orgasm. As a result of the method used, fragmenting discourses into themes, the thesis is unable to present how orgasm issues related to the women's lives more generally. This was only discussed briefly in chapter seven and could be explored more thoroughly. Future research will benefit by exploring this issue utilising different methods of data-gathering and analysis.

8.2.4 Method: Face to face semi-structured interviews

In the methods section, I outlined the rationale for choosing face to face semi-structured interviews. Here, I consider my influence on the interviews. Feminist research has stressed the importance and relevance of interviewer-interviewee matching (Griffin & Phonix, 1994). Similarity is often noted for its potential to reduce the effects of power in research and as a way of establishing rapport with participants (Bola, 1996). However, it is impossible to create a complete matching and to determine a-priori which identity categories and related experiences are salient and therefore require matching (Bower, 2000). Moreover, I believe that certain mismatching could have an advantage, as I will go on to discuss.

A mismatch between all the interviewees and me was present since I am Israeli and my participants are British. This may have reduced my ability to understand and represent British women's experiences due to possible differences in shared history. On occasions, I also felt that it reduced my ability to establish rapport with my interviewees. In one case

I went to interview a woman from the 'oldest age' group. Unlike most, this interview was conducted in her house outside London in what seemed to me a very small village. My initial sense was that she represented a culture very different from my own. While sitting in her car on the way to her house I felt unable to relate to her, which made me aware of my automatic mechanism of looking for common grounds. I believe that one establishes rapport with interviewees partially via finding common grounds before entering the construction of an interview, in which generally one person shares her experiences whilst the other is silent regarding her experiences. My nationality may have created difficulties in this respect. Yet, it must be noted that the interview with the woman mentioned above was, despite initial reservations, a very rich one.

However, I believe that this mismatching also had advantages. First, there were situations in which I asked the interviewees to elucidate some of their expressions and images. My otherness increased the requirement for more detailed explanations and often enriched the data. Second, it may have reduced the interviewees' self-consciousness regarding socially desirable responses. Moreover, it may increase a feeling of anonymity since we did not share common social circles. As one interviewee said, it might be easier to talk with a stranger regarding such an intimate and personal topic:

“It’s a private thing. I sort of hide it. As you are a stranger...It makes it a bit easier. You are not going to talk to my friends about what I said” (Anita MNP).

Finally, I believe that the interviewer, like the interviewee, is influenced by social cues regarding the person who they interview. Being from a different culture helped me being

more 'naïve' in relation to social cues regarding my interviewees, and to assume less about them, which was an advantage for me as the interviewer.

In terms of other categories of identity and of shared experiences, I matched the 'youngest' age group and the 'problems' group. I think the age differences created some difficulties in my rapport with the other two age groups particularly since I am not married and have no children, and thus do not share some essential experiences with these women. They might have viewed me as more sexually active, based on certain cultural assumptions that older people are less sexually active (Jones 2002), and might have felt uncomfortable with their sexual lives.

8.2.5 Interview schedule

The main question regarding the interview schedule was whether to focus on orgasm and problems with it or to carry out a more general interview evolving around women's sexual experiences as a whole. The latter might have enabled a more organic discussion about the presence and absence of orgasm and might have better reflected the importance that women attach to orgasm in the context of sex and relationships. I was also criticised for asking directly about problems and by that producing a problem-oriented image of women's sexuality. However, as argued previously, it is impossible to study 'natural' or 'culture free' sexual behaviours. It is most probable that unless having asked directly about orgasm and problems with it, this issue would not have come up in the data as often due to inherent cultural taboos.

8.2.6 Ethical issues concerning the face-to-face interview

A face to face interview is an interaction between two people. As such, it can be an intrusive experience that influences both people. This is especially true when the interview is about a sexual topic. Thus, it is important to be aware of the boundaries and of the contract between the interviewer and the interviewee and to reflect upon the possible influences on both parties.

In this sense, reflecting upon my research, there were two important ethical issues regarding the influence of the interview on the interviewee. First, my interview schedule focused on women's experiences of orgasm and problems with orgasm and the meaning they attach to these experiences. Since I was interested in women's experiences of problems with orgasm, I probably asked more questions about this subject and stayed longer on this topic than on any other. It is fair to assume that for most interviewees the interview was the longest time they had ever talked on the subject. By creating such a situation for women I might have contributed to the construction of absence of orgasm as a problem, to the interviewees' perspective of themselves as dysfunctional and to the social pressure to experience an orgasm.

Having chosen this focus for the interview, I tried to be aware of my choice of words and not to create the impression that absence of orgasm is a problem or that women who do not experience orgasm at all or in certain situations are dysfunctional. In some cases, I gave women information such as that 80% of women cannot experience orgasm by

penetration alone. In a few cases, when asked about it, I shared with the interviewees my own experiences.

I do not know the impact of the interviews on my interviewees. I assume that it had different impacts on different interviewees. As described in the method section, there were a number of interviewees who were asked whether they experienced problem with orgasm in the initial communication over the phone. This was done toward the end of the data collection when more interviews from certain sample groups were needed. In a number of cases, interviewees said in the initial phone conversation that they experienced problems with orgasm, yet after the interview when they answered the questionnaire they replied that they did not. It is possible to understand this change as resulting from the long discussion regarding orgasm and problems with it. Perhaps talking at length about their experiences in an interview that also asked them to reflect upon the social context of their experiences changed their self-perception. In this sense, the interviews had a positive influence on a number of women who changed their self-perception regarding being sexually dysfunctional. Yet, it can also be argued that, influenced by the negative stigma regarding problems with orgasm, women felt less comfortable in a face-to-face situation saying that they had problems with orgasm.

Howarth, Foster and Dorrer (2004) argued that “the process of seeking out participants’ representations, analysing them and asking participants to consider them, may encourage collaborative critical reflection, social debate and ‘conscientization’” (p. 240). They believe that using such an approach would enable the researcher to play a role in the

facilitation of participant agency and help marginalized groups to gain power over dominant representations. I considered my role as a researcher to influence women's views and representations on female orgasm, sexuality and ultimately self-representation. I could have been explicit during the interview or at the end of the interview regarding the notion of social constructionism in respect to the presence and absence of female orgasm. However, I felt that the 'contract' between my interviewees and me was that they talked and I listened. They did not come to listen to my beliefs on the subject. Hence, I felt it was inappropriate, taking into consideration the power relation between interviewer and interviewee, to air my opinion. Instead, I offered all the interviewees the chance to read the results of the research. At the end of the research, when I approached them again, they might have made an explicit decision to be informed on the subject.

Second, interviewing women about their sexual experience includes the risk of being too intrusive. Women might say things in the interview and expose themselves in a way that they might regret later. This required me to be aware of women's needs and wishes and to avoid being too intrusive on subjects which I felt were uncomfortable for the interviewees to discuss further. I had to negotiate my wish to collect data on the subject and the interviewee's need to protect her boundaries.

Regarding the influence of the interview on the interviewer, I felt the need to protect my own boundaries. An interview is not a therapeutic situation, nor a conversation between friends. In a few occasions there was an ambiguity regarding my role. In those occasions, I felt that the interviewees wanted me to be their friend or their therapist. I tried to re-

negotiate my role in a way that would not offend the interviewee while protecting my boundaries and my needs.

8.2.7 Sample design for the media analysis

Women's magazines were the most cited source of information about orgasm in the interview-based study. Indeed, the analysis of these magazines explored an important element in women's social and cultural environments. The main problem in choosing women's magazines is that, by definition, they are targeted at women. Hence, it is of little surprise that much of the focus is directed at women and at what they can do to change their personal status. The analysis of other relevant media tools targeted at both men and women would contribute significantly to an understanding of the social representation of the absence and presence of orgasm.

8.3 Conclusion and Implications

The thesis introduces a new approach to the research on female orgasm, which is based on the embodiment standpoint and the Social Representations approach. It critiques traditional literature on female orgasm that fails to recognise the social construction that shapes women's experiences. It is a continuation of existing feminist research and expands upon it. By using a triangulated methodology involving an interview study and media analysis, the thesis accentuates the social, subjective and bodily aspects of the female orgasm and problems with it. It offers answers to the three research questions raised in the introduction.

8.3.1 Summary of findings regarding the first research question

The first research question is: **How do women experience orgasm and problems with orgasm?** Contrary to previous data that focuses upon either the biological or the emotional aspects of orgasm (Mah & Binik, 2001), this research establishes that women experience orgasm as a multidimensional event. Most interviewees perceived orgasm as a physical, emotional and relational experience. In general, orgasm was experienced as an extreme event, yet on some occasions it was also seen as a mundane, functional act. When discussing the physical aspect of the experience, orgasm was mainly described as a release and a fulfilment of a need. It was compared to other bodily events such as a sneeze, a heart attack and giving birth. The physical aspect of orgasm was important to women partly because it grounded their experiences in the body and represented it as natural.

When discussing the mental aspect of the experience it was described as a mystical, out of control experience, which instigated positive feelings during and after the experience. However, orgasm was also associated with negative emotions such as fear and guilt, especially when referring to the loss of control.

Finally, when discussing the relational aspect of the experience, it was portrayed as a romantic event that binds two partners together; it was described as important to one's partner, a communicative practice and a mutual goal.

The findings establish that the physical, emotional and relational-sexual aspects of the experience are interlinked. These findings are a continuation of existing research and expand upon it. Little research has been done before on women's subjective experiences of orgasm as more focus has been given to an objective definition of the concept (Mah & Binik, 2001). Existing literature describes some elements of the experience that this research identified. For example, Hite (1976) describes explosive pleasure radiating throughout the pelvic area followed by tension and warmth throughout the entire body, which was followed by post-orgasm feelings such as happiness, relaxation and satisfaction. Similarly, Davidson (1980) describes both physiological events, such as general muscular sensations together with general mood changes, amongst which are a release of tension, altered states of consciousness, and strong emotions.

Problems with orgasm were experienced as emotional and relational experiences. On a relational level, the effects of problems with orgasm were described as reducing sexual desire, as upsetting women's sexual partners and as threatening upon the partners' sense of manhood. In addition, problems with orgasm were constructed partly by the women's partners' emotional reactions and deeds. On an emotional level, problems with orgasm were experienced as instigating feelings of frustration, inadequacy and of 'missing out'. At the same time, many women talked of feelings of acceptance and coming to terms with their condition.

Very little previous research has been conducted on women's experiences of problems with orgasm, and what has been done was mainly concerned with the correlation between

the absence of orgasm and sexual satisfaction. Most research finds no connection between the absence of orgasm and the impairment of a satisfying sexual life (Bardwaick, 1971; Fisher, 1978; Frank et al, 1978 and Michael et al, 1994). The ratio for two studies that do find such a correlation lies in the realm of social expectations (Clifford, 1978; Waterman & Chiauzzi, 1982).

The research reveals that more than half of the interviewees come to terms with their condition. This supports the finding of Nicolson and Burr (2003), who argue that women attach smaller importance to orgasm than clinical literature on the subject does. Moreover, the research determines that the exploration of problems with orgasm solely through the question of the reduction of sexual satisfaction is inappropriate. Only a small number of women attributed the decline of sexual enjoyment and of sexual desire to problems with orgasm. In common with Clifford (1978) the research shows that women viewed their partners' reactions as most meaningful to the construction of their experiences of problems with orgasm.

These findings call for a re-examination of the DSM classification of sexual disorders. The DSM IV definition of sexual disorder is based mainly on Masters and Johnson's (1966) description of the human sexual cycle. This description has been critiqued for neglecting the subjective-mental aspects of the sexual act (Robinson, 1976; Zilbergeld & Ellison, 1980) and ignoring the gender inequality in heterosexual relations (Segal, 1994). By focusing only on the physical aspects of sex, the human sexual response cycle denies women's voice and women's social value training (Tiefer, 1995). Hence, DSM should

develop a different attitude towards the domain of female sexuality, one which would take into account women's subjective experiences. Women do not always experience the absence of orgasm as a problem; their experience of it as problematic is linked to other aspects of their relationship and sexual activity.

8.3.2 Summary of findings regarding the second research question

The second research question is: **What is the social representation of female orgasm?**

Orgasm was represented by the interviewees and the media as a natural, healthy and normal experience, a goal of the sexual act and important to women's partners. It was constructed as an end point to a 'proper' sexual encounter, linked to mature sexual womanhood and related to men's sense of manhood. These findings are a continuation to, and expand upon existing literature that argues that orgasm is perceived as the ultimate goal of sex (Davidson & Moore, 1994; Heath, 1982; Laumann et al., 1994; Potts, 2000) and as a normal experience (Nicolson & Burr, 2003).

This social representation was also embraced by all sample groups, with no exception. According to Moscovici (1984) there is always the possibility for individuals and groups to resist and change representations. However, he argued, social representations also have 'irresistible force' which makes them difficult to resist. The 'taken-for-granted status is one element of social representations that contributes to their 'irresistible force'. As the results of this study showed, the social representations of female orgasm are held consensually by all age groups. The pervasive nature of these social representations and

the lack of alternative representations disable individuals to resist these social representations.

Similarly to literature on representations of femininity and sexuality in women's magazines, this research finds that female orgasm was represented in women's magazines in a contradictory way. Female orgasm was presented as a natural and a romantic experience as well as a goal that needed to be worked towards. It was both a symbol of the assertive independent woman, and related to women as good lovers, responsible for the relationship and for reassuring men's sense of manhood. These representations form some of the tension that exists between the importance of (heterosexual) relationships and the self-responsibility for pleasure (Ballaster et al., 1991). Orgasm is constructed both as a woman's right and as a woman's duty to her partner. This message is continuous with the old stigma that perceived women as the object of male desire (Nicolson & Burr, 2003).

Problems with orgasm were represented mainly as harming one's relationship and one's partner. Though absence of orgasm was recognised as a normal experience, it was attributed to the problematic nature of female sexuality. Problems with orgasm were seen as non-feminine and as emblematic of one's emotional inhibitions and of the problematic nature of one's sexual relationship.

The descriptions presented by both the interviewees and the media glorified the female orgasm and at the same time pathologised women's experiences. This glorification was

more apparent in the women's magazines but was also evident in the interviews, although the latter also blamed the media for this glorification. This double-standard actually enables women to embrace it and to step away from it at the same time.

This research establishes that social representations of orgasm are constructed and reproduced in both the micro and the macro social milieus by the media, women and their partners. Along the argument of Jackson and Scott (2001), it constitutes that one's relationships and past experiences, which involve both discursive and non-discursive resources, reproduce these representations and seldom resist them at the same time.

8.3.3 Summary of findings regarding the third research question

The last question is: How is the social representation of female orgasm applied in common-sense thinking, and how does it influence the ways women regard their sexuality, their relationships and themselves? The research finds that women use social representations of orgasm to interpret their gender identity, the sexual act and their relationships. Women and men apply common understandings of the female orgasm to measure themselves and their relationships. Recurrence of orgasm on a regular basis reinforces a gender identity of a womanhood, which is normal and a sexually healthy. Problems with orgasm create feelings of inadequacy, frustration and missing out, and shape women's views of themselves as less sexual or less feminine. The contradictory nature of social representations of female orgasm, being regarded as both a controlled and an uncontrolled experience, or as both a natural and a learned experience, brings about

feelings of shame and fear. These feelings are understood as a way of negotiating the contradicting positions expected from women. The social representations of orgasm also inform men and women's sexual behaviour; they advocate vaginal penetration and dissuade the use of fantasies and clitoral manipulation.

These results go along SRA argument that SRs permeate individuals' lived experiences and social realities. SRs inform and legitimise particular beliefs and practices. They are embedded in conscious and non-conscious practices, guide action, interactions and can maintain inequality (Grevais & Jochelovitch, 1998; Howarth et al, 2004).

8.3.4 Evaluation of theoretical approach

The thesis utilizes two theoretical standpoints, the social representation approach and the embodiment standpoint. This section assesses the usefulness of each approach to the research.

8.3.4.1 Social Representations Approach

The SRA has proved to be a useful approach to utilise in the research domain of female orgasm since it enables the researcher to contextualise women's experiences in their local social and cultural context. The focus of the approach on the construction of meaning through communication guided the choice of triangulate methodology in this research,

which included both individual interviews and media analysis. The results of the research demonstrate that the current social representations of female orgasm glorify the experience of orgasm and pathologise women who do not experience the 'right orgasm' frequently, 'naturally' and through penetration. The results also suggest the implications of these representations for women's gender identity, emotions and sexual practice. Social representations are regarded on two levels: as content and as a process. This observation enabled the researcher to explore both the content of the current social representations of female orgasm and its implications.

The sample of the study enabled the researcher to demonstrate the all-encompassing nature of these social representations and the lack of alternative representations. These findings explain the difficulties individuals experience in resisting the social representations of female orgasm even when these representations conflict with their own experiences. SRA argues that people use SRs to position themselves, to construct their identities and to make sense of their experiences and relationships (Howarth, 2002). SRA literature shows that representations of health and illness can marginalize and stigmatise people labelled as 'ill' (Howarth et al., 2004). This research shows the stigmatisation of women who experience absence of orgasm in certain situations. The stigma attached to these experiences and the influence on their gender identity and their relationships further explain the difficulty in resisting the current social representations.

However, I would like to highlight a number of difficulties in utilising the SRA in the context of this specific research. SRA focuses mainly on the construction of knowledge through communication. This is an important element of the approach and one which was

shown to be important in this research. However, this research also explores women's experiences and demonstrates conflicts between those experiences and social representations. The data of this research presents a number of contradictions and conflicts in women's subjective experiences. In a number of interviews, the interviewees talked of contradictory feelings regarding the presence and absence of orgasm, for example in relation to the romantic and normal representation of orgasm. Though there is some discussion in SRA regarding conflicting representations, there is very little discussion about inner-conflicts and discrepancies between people's experiences and social representations. These contradictions may be better explained using other theoretical approaches. For example, in Nicolson and Burr's (2003) analysis of women's discussions on sex and orgasm, similar contradictions are analysed using Hollway's discourse analysis (1984, 1989 *ibid* Nicolson and Burr, 2003) and a psychodynamic interpretative framework. This difficulty in using SRA is also influenced by the approach focus on knowledge and neglect of the body and embodiment experience.

Similarly, in relation to women's discussion of acceptance, using the SRA this discussion can be analysed mainly as strategies to minimise the negative implications of the current SRs, protect their sense of self, and defend their esteem (Howarth et al, 2004). However, such an analysis contributes to the current social representations regarding the high importance of female orgasm to women's sexual enjoyment. Another possible explanation of these discussions is that they present a conflict between women's experiences of orgasm as trivial or insignificant and the current social representations.

Finally, SRA defines the development of SRs as a 'symbolic coping': "a collective activity of a group struggling to maintain the integrity of its worldwide view, which is also crucial for social identity" (Wagner & Kronberger, 2001: 156). There is some discussion about the development of SRs as a way of achieving social and political goals, yet with very little empirical research on the subject (Jost & Ignatow, 2001). Hence, the SRA do not facilitate an exploration of the political implications of the current SRs and their role in maintaining a patriarchal and commercially centred view of female orgasm. Though the approach extensively discusses the role of 'scientific knowledge' in constructing SRs, it does not acknowledge the power relation in these constructions and the motives behind scientific research. SRA is interested in the social construction of lay beliefs but neglects to explore the social aspect of scientific knowledge as a tool to maintain existing inequalities in its social milieu.

8.3.4.2 The Embodiment Standpoint

Explicitly utilizing the embodiment standpoint is a way of balancing the Social Representations Approach. The embodiment standpoint acknowledges that we live in a community which is both linguistic and bodily (Sampson, 1998). Utilising it enables the research to focus on the social sphere in a multilevel analysis. The analysis, which considers both the public sphere and women's relationships, facilitates a richer discussion of the construction of the presence and absence of female orgasm. It enables the research to explore both the micro and macro level of social construction.

Following Merleau-Ponty and Bourdieu, this thesis argues that 'bodily practices' impinge upon subjectivity, self and identity (Gillies *et al.*, 2004). Embodiment, like language, is socially constructed. In addition, we understand the world and ourselves in the world through embodiment and language. Women's experiences of the presence and absence of orgasm in the context of their relationships and their social position construct their gender and sexual identity. Women use their bodily experience to interpret their gender identity, their relationships and their experiences.

The research domain of female sexuality can gain from utilising the embodiment standpoint. This standpoint enables us as researchers to grasp the multilevel, dynamic and reciprocal process by which we constitute our sexual experiences. However, more empirical and theoretical literature is needed to develop the embodiment theoretical approach. More research is needed on the methodological question, as well as the process within which women construct their experiences using discursive and non-discursive resources.

8.3.5 Accomplishments of the thesis

Analysis of the data shows that relationships play a meaningful role in the reproduction of a common understanding of orgasm. The discursive and non-discursive resources of one's relationship inform the process in which women construct their experiences as normal and natural or as problematic, and in which they construct themselves as sexually

healthy or dysfunctional. Communication and sexual behaviour in one's relationship can also assist to distance the negative implications of social representation. The research is innovative in its conceptualising of 'female orgasmic disorder' as a social phenomenon and in its highlighting of the function of a relationship in the construction of women's experiences of this phenomenon.

The thesis is the first research into media representation of female orgasm. It integrates a study of women's subjective experiences with a media analysis. This integration advances the scientific understanding of the way by which social representations are generated and are modified, through social context and social communication.

The body is of increasing interest to social psychologists and of particular interest to feminist academics (Ciclitira & Weaver, 2002). This thesis enhances the study of the embodiment standpoint by interpreting the composition of the discursive and non-discursive elements of social psychological life. It argues that women and their partners manifest and rework social representations of orgasm through their interactions.

Finally, the research is part of a feminist effort to understand and map the ways in which gender constitutes women's identities and bodies. It accentuates the process by which women internalise prevailing definitions of female orgasm. The internalisation of such representations is fundamental to the formation of feminine and sexual identity and to the production of sexual endeavours.

8.3.6 Implications for sex research

The thesis introduces women's perspective into this research field and draws the attention of clinical literature and diagnosis to it. It rejects the current definition of psycho-sexual disorder which is based on Masters and Johnson 'human sexual response cycle' theory. The psycho-sexual disorder definition gives legitimacy to the current representation of orgasm as a goal to reach and as an ultimate endpoint for sexual intercourse. This representation, which does not reflect women's needs and desires, is the basis for women's distress. Changing the scientific understanding of female orgasm is especially important since science plays a key role in the construction of social representation.

Current research in this field dichotomises the biological and the psychological aspects of orgasm, and focuses on the biological understanding of orgasm (Mah and Binik, 2001). The thesis proves that orgasm and problems with orgasm should be understood as a multidimensional experience. It establishes that it is impossible to fully understand women's experiences without understanding the social milieus within which they exist. Those social milieus are composed by discursive and non-discursive resources that inform women's experiences.

Hence, the thesis calls for a change in sex research and in the research domain of female orgasm in particular. Sexual experiences should be understood as a point of intersection between biological, psychological and sociological worlds. More emphasis should be given to the micro, as well as the macro social milieus of these experiences. The

approach of sex research must detach from the biomedical approach in order to reflect accurately women's experiences.

This change is particularly needed today. Since the world-wide success of Viagra, there have been continuous efforts made to produce a similar pill designated for women that would help them overcome sexual problems. As part of the marketing strategy, attempts are made to strengthen the notion of orgasm as the ultimate goal of the sexual intercourse. This way, women who experience problems with orgasm would be regarded as pathological and thus would be recommended to use this medical alternative.

The thesis echoes the call to resist the medicalisation of female and male sexual problems (e.g. Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Potts et al, 2003; Reid, 2003; Tiefer, 2002). The thesis establishes that the absence of orgasm is not always experienced as a problem. The negative implications of the absence of orgasm may be reduced not only by biomedical solutions but also by changing social representations of female orgasm, sex, womanhood and manhood. As much as there is a need to find solutions to physical problems that withhold women from experiencing orgasm, there is also a need to normalise women's experiences and to change the social representations of female orgasm in such a way that will empower both women and men.

Baur and Gaskell (1999) discussed the notion of the representational project. They argued that SRs are developed and elaborated in the context of particular projects in which social groups actively engage, collaborate or compete. Others argued that the representations

held by professionals about ill health play an important part in maintaining structured inequalities. Yet, studies showed that minorities can resist the dominant representations (Arruda, 2003; Howarth et al, 2004) and that such. Resistance can be constructed both at the level of a particular group and at a wider level, such as social movements and community participation (Duveen, 2001). Howarth et al (2004) argued that SR researchers should develop a proactive rather than a reactive approach and engage in the transformation of knowledge.

In the research domain of female sexuality, critical feminist psychologist researchers have argued that sexologist and clinical and medical literature maintains a patriarchal and commercially centred view on sexuality. Such views promote penetrative sex, female submission and the objectification of women. Victorian patriarchal theory and practice continues to inform research, social representations and the definition of what is 'normal', healthy and 'desirable' (Nicolson & Burr, 2003). The medicalisation of sexuality and 'sexual problems', which is promoted by pharmaceutical companies and the medical profession, adds to the understanding of female sexuality primarily as a response to male sexuality and intercourse. The sexologist and medical literature, which disregards women's experiences, the social context of these experiences and power relations in society, legitimise and inform stigmatised images of female sexuality, and maintain social inequalities.

This thesis defines itself as feminist research, following Tiefer's (1995) definition. According to her, "feminist sexuality research is research on sexuality that is of, by and

for women's interests" (p. 103). She argued that, in the face of the dominant male-centred sexology paradigm, feminist sex research should emphasise women's diverse voices. I believe my research follows her argument. Taking into consideration that feminism is a political term, and defining this research as feminist research, acknowledges that scientific research is always a social activity undertaken in a particular sociocultural context and shaped by ideologies (Tiefer, 1995). Following the claim of Baur and Gaskell (1999) about representational projects, it is the responsibility of feminist researchers to resist hegemony representations of female sexuality which are promoted by patriarchal science, and advance, develop and elaborate alternative representations which acknowledge the diversity of human sexuality and power relations within society. I hope that by putting forward women's voices and contextualising them in their historical and cultural context I have added to a feminist effort to change the social representations that marginalize and pathologise women's experiences.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Semi- structured interview schedule

- | | | |
|---------------------------------|----|--|
| Opening questions | 1 | What comes to your mind when you look at these pictures? |
| | 2 | What do you associate with the word sex? |
| Social representation of orgasm | 3 | What thoughts or images come to your mind when you hear the word 'orgasm'? |
| | 4 | How do you think orgasm is regarded today in the general population? |
| | 5 | When you and your friends discuss sex, or orgasm, if it all, What kinds of things are said? |
| Subjective experience | 6 | When you look back, when did you first think about orgasm?
Could you please tell me about that thought? |
| | 7 | What was your most significant experience related to orgasm |
| | 8 | Have there been times when you have had problems with orgasm? |
| | 9 | What part does _____ play in your life?
[orgasm/problems with orgasms/lack of orgasm] |
| Sexuality | 10 | What does having an orgasm mean to you? |
| | 11 | How do you feel about your sexuality? |

Appendix 2: Questionnaire used after the interview

I would be very thankful if you could complete this questionnaire. Your information would be completely confidential. This will help us to have a better understanding on an under-researched issue. If you have any questions please do not hesitate to ask.

1. Age :

2. What is your occupation?

3. What is your education?
 - O level/GCSEs
 - A level
 - Vocational Qualifications
 - Degree/Professional Equivalent
 - Postgraduate Degree

4. What is your ethnic origin?
 - White
 - Black
 - Asian Subcontinent
 - Asian (Far East)
 - Other: _____

5. Do you currently have a sexual partner (e.g. boyfriend, husband)?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

6. If you answered no to the previous question, when did you last have a sexual partner?
7. How old were you when you first had sexual intercourse?
8. How many sexual partners have you had?

For each of the following questions, please circle the letter next to the answer that fits you best. Please choose only one answer for each question.

There are no right or wrong answers!

9. Have you had sexual experience (sexual experience is any kind of contact with another person that you felt was sexual):

- a. only with men
- b. more often with men and at least once with a woman
- c. about equally with men and with women
- d. more often with women and at least once with a man
- e. only with women

10. On average how often did you have sexual intercourse in the last month?

- a. none
- b. once a month
- c. twice a month
- d. once a week
- e. 2-3 times a week
- f. everyday or almost everyday

11. Do you masturbate?

- a. Yes
- b. No

12. If you masturbate, on average how often do you experience orgasm during masturbation?

- a. never
- b. 0-25%
- c. 26%-50% of the time
- d. 51%-75% of the time
- e. 76%-90% of the time
- f. 91%-100% of the time

13. On average how often do you experience orgasm during penetration?

- a. never
- b. 0-25%
- c. 26%-50% of the time
- d. 51%-75% of the time
- e. 76%-90% of the time
- f. 91%-100% of the time

14. On average how often do you experience orgasm during sexual activity with a partner?

- g. never
- h. 0-25%
- i. 26%-50% of the time
- j. 51%-75% of the time
- k. 76%-90% of the time
- l. 91%-100% of the time

15. How do you feel regarding the frequency of your orgasms?

- a. not often enough
- b. just right
- c. too often
- d. do not think about it

16. When was the last occasion on which you experienced orgasm?

- a. Have never experienced orgasm.
- b. In the last 7 days.
- c. More than 8 days ago.

17. Are you physically satisfied with your sex life?

- a. very satisfied
- b. satisfied
- c. not one way or the other
- d. dissatisfied
- e. very dissatisfied

18. Are you emotionally satisfied with your sex life?

- a. very satisfied
- b. satisfied
- c. not one way or the other
- d. dissatisfied
- e. very dissatisfied

19. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

'it is very important for a woman to experience orgasm during sexual intercourse'?

- a. strongly agree
- b. agree
- c. do not have an opinion
- d. disagree
- e. strongly disagree

20. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

'it is very important for a man to experience orgasm during sexual intercourse'?

- a. strongly agree
- b. agree
- c. do not have an opinion
- d. disagree
- e. strongly disagree

21. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

'it is very important for a woman that her partner experience orgasm during sexual intercourse'?

- a. strongly agree
- b. agree
- c. do not have an opinion
- d. disagree
- e. strongly disagree

22. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement:

'it is very important for a man that his partner experience orgasm during sexual intercourse'?

- a. strongly agree
- b. agree
- c. do not have an opinion
- d. disagree
- e. strongly disagree

23. Would you define yourself as having problems with orgasm?

- a. yes
- b. no

Please describe:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Thank you very much for your time and co-operation. It is greatly appreciated!

Appendix 3: Summary information of interview participants

Interviewee	Identifies herself as having problems with orgasm	Age	Occupation	Educational level	Have a sexual partner	Sexual experience
Beth	Yes	62	Lecturer/ artist	Degree	Yes	Only with men
Gloria	No	32	PA	Degree	Yes	Only with men
Beverly	No	30	Probation officer	Degree	Yes	Mainly with men
Emily	No	27	Youth worker	PD ⁵	No	Mainly with men
Felicia	No	61	Vocational assessment consultant	PD	Yes	Only with men
Florence	Yes	30	Unemployed	GCSE	Yes	Mainly with men
Zoe	No	31	Student	PD	Yes	Mainly with men
Sally	No	28	Volunteer	PD	Yes	Mainly with men
Jane	No	28	Unemployed	Degree	No	Only with men
Valerie	No	29	Local government officer	Degree	No	Only with men
Irene	No	27	Journalist	Degree	Yes	Mainly with men
Amy	No	27	Student	Degree	Yes	Only with men
Sophia	Yes	28	Student	PD	Yes	Mainly with men
Sarah	No	48	Complementary therapist	Degree	Yes	Mainly with men
Chloe	Yes	31	Health clinic worker	VQ ⁶	Yes	Mainly with men
Leah	Yes	53	Retired	PD	No	Only with men
Julie	No	61	Training consultant	PD	No	Only with men
Kira	No	62	Retired	Degree	No	Only with men
June	Yes	55	Social research interviewer	Degree	Yes	Only with men
Lana	No	50	Training consultant	Degree	Yes	Only with men
Amber	No	53	Actor	GCSE	Yes	Only with men
Grace	No	49	Management development	PD	Yes	Only with men
Tamara	No	52	IT consultant	VQ	Yes	Mainly with women
Tanya	No	63	Retired	Degree	Yes	Only with men
Anita	No	50	Information manager	PD	Yes	Mainly with men

⁵ Postgraduate Degree

⁶ Vocational Qualification

Summary information of interview participants

Interviewee	Identifies herself as having problems with orgasm	Age	Occupation	Educational level	sexual partner	Sexual experience
Hillary	No	49	Clerical assistant, mother and a wife	PD	Yes	Only with men
Jill	Yes	25	PA	Degree	Yes	Mainly with men
Karen	Yes	30	Student	Degree	Yes	Mainly with men
Brenda	Yes	24	Artist manager	Degree	Yes	Mainly with men
Edna	No	29	Customer services	GCSE	Yes	Only with men
Laura	Yes	32	Jewellery maker	GCSE	No	Mainly with men
Molly	Yes	28	Youth worker	GCSE	Yes	both men and women
Ann	Yes	29	Unemployed	Degree	No	Mainly with men
Monic	No	65	Lecturer	PD	No	Mainly with men
Ellen	Yes	48-55	Writer	Degree	No	Only with men
Nicole	No	52	Health psychologist	PD	Yes	Only with men
Cora	No	50	Finance	PD	No	Only with men
Ursula	Yes	54	PR consultant	Degree	No	Only with men
Daryl	Yes	31	Administrator	PD	Yes	Only with men
Daisy	Yes	52	Teacher	PD	No	Only with men
Renee	Yes	65	Volunteer	Degree	Yes	Only with men
Lily	Yes	62	Retired	Degree	Yes	Only with men
Robin	Yes	60	Retired	Degree	Yes	Only with men
Eve	Yes	51	Health Advisor	PD	No	Only with men
Sue	Yes	48	Mother	Degree	Yes	Only with men
Casey	Yes	65	Retired	Degree	No	Only with men
Denise	Yes	53	Charity consultant volunteer	A level	No	Only with men
Rose	No	53	Housewife	Degree	Yes	Only with men
Clara	Yes	49	Foreign language training	PD	Yes	Only with men
Mary	Yes	55	Housewife	GCSE	Yes	Only with men

Appendix 4: Transcript Notation

[text]	Indicates clarification information that are not part of the transcript
(...)	indicates that part of the extract has been omitted
[]	indicates an unclear word in the recording
(laughing)	Indicates that the interviewer were clearly laughing
...	Indicates silence in a middle of the interviewer talk for at least few seconds

Some sounds are transcribed phonetically, for example, haaa.

Grammatical punctuation has been added, where necessary, to assist readability.

**Appendix 5: Representation of orgasm and problems with orgasm
(frequency in Cosmopolitan and Woman's Weekly)**

Code	Cosmopolitan			Woman's Weekly	
	1972-1983 (68 pages)	1984- 1993 (14 p)	1994- 2001 (63 p)	1961-1992 (10 letters)	1993-2001 (17 letters)
Description of orgasm					
Valuable experience	19	6	27	3	6
Important to partner	14	2	14	7	9
Be-all-end-all debate	9	1	12	9	15
Physical experience	10	2	19	0	2
Mental experience	8	0	11	0	3
Mutual + multiple orgasms	10	4	9	0	4
Description of problems with orgasm					
Negative emotions	12	0	3	9	5
Stigma of women with problems	7	0	1	3	1
Explanations of presence and absence of orgasm					
Emotional	23	5	12	3	13
Physical	12	2	16	3	4
Activity/knowledge	13	5	19	2	9
Relational	14	3	12	6	5

**Appendix 6: Social representation of presence and absence of orgasm
(frequency in interviews)**

Table A6.1: Sources of social representation

		Problems (25 women)	No problems (25 women)	'Youngest' (20)	Middle (20)	'Oldest' (10)	Total (50)
Media	General	16	17	12	13	8	33
	Magazines	11	11	9	8	5	22
	books	6	8	2	8	4	14
Conversations with friends		14	9	14	3	6	23
Do not talk with friends		15	12	6	17	4	27

Table A6.2: Social representation of the presence and absence of orgasm

	Problems (25 women)	No problems (25 women)	'Youngest' (20)	Middle (20)	'Oldest' (10)	Total (50)
Orgasmic imperative	15	11	12	9	5	26
Extreme positive	8	4	5	4	3	12
Scientific ideas	8	6	5	7	2	14
all have orgasms	8	4	4	7	1	12
Taboo- in the past	3	5	0	2	6	8
Taboo-today	11	8	10	8	1	19
all have problems	10	9	7	8	4	19
men are different	4	7	4	6	1	11

Table A6.3: Interviewees' explanations of presence and absence of orgasm

		Problems (25 women)	No problems (25 women)	'Youngest' (20)	Middle (20)	'Oldest' (10)	Total (50)
	Self	22	17	13	18	8	39
	Relationship	17	15	15	10	7	32
Self	Emotional	20	10	12	13	5	30
	Physical	13	10	8	10	5	23
	Activity	8	7	7	5	3	15
	Nature	7	2	2	5	2	9
Relationship	Emotional	14	10	12	7	4	23
	Physical	9	8	9	5	3	17
	Partner	11	9	9	8	3	20

**Appendix 7: Themes: the experience of presence and absence of orgasm
(frequency in interviews)**

	Problems (25 women)	No problems (25 women)	'Youngest' (20)	Middle (20)	'Oldest' (10)	Total (50)
Physical experience	19	24	19	17	7	43
Natural experience	4	7	7	3	1	11
Mental experience	24	23	19	18	10	47
Spiritual experience	15	11	9	13	4	26
Emotional experience	16	20	12	15	9	36
Healthy experience	3	6	3	6	0	9
Relational and sexual experience	22	18	16	16	8	40
Intimate experience	18	13	14	12	5	31
Goal of sex	17	14	13	14	4	31
Partner's wish	15	11	12	9	5	26
Normal	16	11	11	9	5	27
Extreme	17	13	12	14	4	30
Mundane	9	10	11	5	3	19

**Appendix 8: Themes: the experience of problems with orgasm
(frequency in interviews)**

	Problems (25 women)	No problems (25 women)	'Youngest' (20)	Middle (20)	'Oldest' (10)	Total (50)
Partner's reaction	19	7	9	11	6	26
De-motivation for sex	10	3	4	6	3	13
Negative emotions	16	11	10	13	4	27
Acceptance	14	10	7	11	6	24