The Effects of Attentional Focus and Partner Responsiveness on Sexual Responding: Replication and Extension

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The effects of manipulating attentional focus (self- versus partner-focus) and level of partner responsiveness (high, low, and ambiguous) on sexual responding were examined with sexually functional (N = 8) men. These manipulations were embedded in six standardized 3-minute erotic audiotapes. When the partner was displaying high sexual responsiveness, partner-focus resulted in significantly higher levels of penile responding than did self-focus. Post-stimuli questionnaires indicated that, although not statistically significant, self-reported attentiveness was consistently higher under partner-focus conditions. These findings are discussed in regard to their relevance to the concept of spectatoring as discussed by Masters and Johnson (1970). A comparison to previous research that examined the same variables using videotapes is included.

KEY WORDS: attentional focus; sexual responsiveness; audiotapes; spectatoring.

INTRODUCTION

Reports from well-known clinicians (e.g., Kaplan, 1974; Masters and Johnson, 1970) describe the role that cognitive activity plays in sexual dysfunction. For example, Kaplan (1974) considered the contribution of vari-

This research was supported in part by Research Grant MH 33553 from the National Institute of Mental Health.

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ous types of distracting thoughts in the maintenance of her patients' erectile dysfunction. These reports led in part to research that examined the effect of distraction on sexual arousal using "analogous" paradigms such as listening to sequences of single-digit numbers (Farkas et al., 1979; Geer and Fuhr, 1976). Findings from this initial research demonstrated the decremental effect of distraction on male sexual arousal, but the relationship of these "analogies" to the type of distraction present in actual sexual interactions is not clear.

One type of distracting cognitive process that has been associated with sexual dysfunction is the direction of one's focus of attention during sexual interactions; that is, focusing on oneself versus focusing on one's sexual partner. Typically, self-focus is viewed as potentially distracting through a process that has been labeled *spectatoring* by Masters and Johnson (1970). This process involves objectively focusing on one's own reactions during a sexual encounter from a third-person perspective. Masters and Johnson (1970) suggest that spectatoring increases performance fears and results in the dissociation of subjective sexual thoughts and feelings from sexual activity. In order to remedy the deleterious effects of focusing on oneself, a frequently employed therapeutic intervention has been the recommendation to focus on one's partner and the responses of the partner during sexual interaction. Beck *et al.* (1983) argue that the clarity of this conceptualization is muddled by the equally frequently employed technique of *sensate focus*, which involves focusing on one's own responses and enjoying one's sensations of being pleased (Heiman, 1975; Kaplan, 1974; LoPiccolo, 1978; Masters and Johnson, 1970). While both of these "focusing" techniques have been reported as clinically effective, their coexistence clouds a clear conceptualization of the role of attentional focus in sexual dysfunction. Lack of clarity also exists in regard to why one type of "self-focus" is considered debilitating to sexual arousal (spectatoring) and another facilitative (sensate focus).

Only recently has the role of attentional focus received empirical attention. Using erotic films as stimuli, Beck *et al.* (1983) examined the effects of attentional focus instructions (self- versus partner focus) and level of partner responsiveness (high, low, and ambiguous) on sexual responding in sexually functional and sexually dysfunctional men. The partner responsiveness manipulation was included since partner level of arousal or responsiveness has been shown to affect sexual responding (Abel *et al.*, 1975b; Barbaree *et al.*, 1979; Barlow and Abel, 1981). The attentional focus and partner responsiveness instructional sets were delivered just before the subjects viewed an erotic film. Partner-focus, during low perceived partner arousal, resulted in decreased responding relative to self-focus, while when level of partner arousal was ambiguous, partner-focus facilitated arousal. Sexually functional and dysfunctional men responded differentially to focus instructions under perceived high partner arousal.