The Sexual Response as Exercise
A Brief Review and Theoretical Proposal

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Summary

The sexual response is a form of exercise which has strong biological and evolutionary components. Few studies have focused upon sexual behaviour as exercise and the reasons for this are considered. Current information and leads for future study come from animal research. Some historical precursors to modern sex researchers did more to mislead than to advance knowledge but Kinsey and Masters & Johnson set the stage for modern knowledge and applications. There are parallels between the orgasmic response and exercise. Physiological bases of the sexual response help to explain individual differences in sexual behaviour and the well-being that often accompanies states of passionate love, addiction and exercise. Studies suggest that sexual activity is associated with well-being and longevity, yet many health and exercise professionals fail to take account of sexual activity in advancing exercise programmes and executing studies; that is, the so-called Ostrich Effect persists. Investigators need to separate the passionate love stage of relationships which are biologically based and last 3 to 4 years from the later stages of long term committed partnerships in which sexual activity continues as a form of exercise, competence expression and fun.
Major advances in the understanding and encouragement of health and well-being are being delayed by the failure of applied scientists to examine the sexual response as a form of physical exercise. This will be a controversial proposal because sexual behaviour has typically been surrounded with emotional, irrational and religious content and symbolism, which have served to cloud and confuse. Recently a handful of researchers have been examining possible links between sexual behaviour and exercise (Eysenck et al. 1982; Frauman 1982; Bohlen et al. 1985; Whitten & Whiteside 1989). I argue on the basis of the evidence available that the human sexual response is a form of physical exercise – perhaps even the most basic form of physical exercise. It is a biological response which has much in common with sport.

For the purposes of this paper the sexual response refers to consummatory sexual behaviour. I propose that one can distinguish between sexual activity which is not exercise and sexual activity which is exercise. The key to the distinction is orgasmic muscle contractions for both sexes. Masters and Johnson (1966) referred to such muscle contractions as myotonia. They use this term to describe the increased muscular tension which is the second major physiological response to sexual stimulation (the first being vasocongestion).

The thesis that consummated sexual behaviour is a form of exercise in no way advocates irresponsible or casual sexual contacts. On the contrary, I suggest that once the biological bonding (or passion) of the first 3 or 4 years of a relationship have passed, the ability of the couple to settle into a playful, physical and exclusive partnership is what many aim for and the fortunate attain. There are many implications to be derived from this approach for an understanding of the difficulties humans have in managing and directing sexual behaviour.

1. The Ostrich Effect

Until very recently (Butt 1988; Leonard 1989) the study of sexual expression and behaviour has been ignored by those interested in health, fitness and well-being. This ‘Ostrich Effect’ is largely due to the marginalisation of sex research and sex researchers, who have examined sexual behaviour, health and well-being. Since the turn of the century writers such as Sigmund Freud and Havelock Ellis have had to fight for their existence and right to publish. That sex researchers are still considered to be on the fringe can be illustrated by recent papers by Sonenschein (1987), ‘On having one’s research seized’, and Mosher (1989) in a strategic paper on advancing sexual science. It is quite clear from these papers that many researchers working in the field do not feel able to conduct their studies freely, a privilege those researching other topics take for granted.

Studies on physical activity and well-being are plentiful. Several reviews conclude that physical exercise can elevate mood level and thus enhance the feeling of well-being (Browne & Mahoney 1984; Folkins & Sime 1981; Ledwidge 1980). There were 40 to 50 studies in the literature on the effect of exercise on mood as of 1987 (Ledwidge 1987). Positive results outnumber no results by 3 to 1. Thus, when specified conditions are met, physical exercise can elevate mood. One reason for finding no outcome in some studies is that personality as opposed to mood has been included as the dependent variable. Personality traits are not much affected by exercise (Browne & Mahoney 1984) and the major dimensions, introversion-extraversion and stability-instability, are resistant to change. It is affect, feeling of well-being or mood which fluctuates.

The literature on psychological well-being is as voluminous as that on physical activity. Bradburn is perhaps the major pioneer of such work in North America (Bradburn 1969; Bradburn & Caplovitz 1965). Studies of well-being can currently be divided into those focusing on subjective life satisfaction (Andrews & Withey 1976; Campbell 1980; Campbell et al. 1976) and those focusing on adjustment and ability to cope (Lazarus 1966). These studies typically relate well-being to the independent variables of health, quality of social support, socioeconomic variables, family variables, competence and psychological hardiness. A recent ma-