

Chapter 13

Aggressive Cues and Sexual Arousal to Erotica

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The existence of an intimate relationship between sexual arousal and aggression has often been theorized by psychologists (Freud, 1938; Berne, 1964; Stoller, 1976; Bach & Wyden, 1969) and laymen (Ellison, 1947; Caldwell, 1941) alike. In Freud's seminal paper "Three Contributions to the Theory of Sex," for example, he theorized that "the sexuality of most men shows an admixture of aggression, of a desire to subdue...sadism would then correspond to an aggressive component of the sexual instinct which has become independent and exaggerated" (1938, p. 596). Some psychodynamically oriented investigators have gone as far as suggesting that "...hostility, overt or hidden, is what generates and enhances sexual excitement and its absence leads to sexual indifference and boredom" (Stoller, 1976, p. 903).

Other theoreticians have postulated a rather different link between sex and aggression. According to Fromm (1973) our biology is such that for most individuals hostile aggression is incompatible with sexual arousal whereas self-assertive aggressivity, involving the reduction of inhibition, is mutually facilitative with sexuality. Bach and Goldberg (1974) also argue that our biological heritage has led to forceful, uninhibited, but not hostile or destructive, aggression facilitating sexual responsiveness: "Lovers who exclude aggression from their bedroom cheat themselves of a total and exciting experience, and in fact will probably be unable to achieve genuine erotic fulfillment" (p. 256).

Malamuth, Feshbach, and Jaffe (1977) suggest that learning experiences may link sexual and aggressive responses by virtue of their sharing common "taboo" properties. Encouraging a person to engage in one "taboo" response may disin-

hibit other inhibited behaviors. Aggressive cues presented by the experimenter are hypothesized as “turn-offs” of inhibition, thus facilitating sexual arousal, rather than as a “turn-on” of sexual feeling. LoPiccolo and Miller (1975a, 1975b) employed a similar proposition in beginning their sexual enrichment programs for normal couples with a session in which participants uttered “taboo” words using vulgar phrases. Experimentally, Feshbach, Malamuth and Drapkin (1974) report that facilitating or inhibiting subjects’ aggression in the administration of electric shocks had generalizing effects to sexual responsiveness.

The question arises as to why sexual and aggressive behaviors would be more inclined to be associated than other socially constrained behaviors. There are at least three factors that may contribute to a unique association between these behaviors. First, there are many physiological similarities between sex and aggression (Zillmann, 1984). In the well-known Kinsey studies (Kinsey, Pomeroy, Martin & Gebhard, 1953), it was first noted that in both males and females as many as fourteen of the eighteen physiological changes that occur in sexual responses also accompany aggressive responses. Many other taboo behaviors such as stealing, inappropriate dress, picking one’s nose, etc. do not share such physiological similarities with sexual responses. Secondly, there are overt behavioral similarities in features of sexual and aggressive behaviors, e.g., an intense physical embrace and wrestling. Thus, as psychoanalysts have noted, a young child observing adults copulating may mistake the sexual act for an aggressive assault. It may well be that inhibitions associated with engaging in behaviors such as squeezing, screaming, clawing, or grunting in the context of an aggressive act generalize to similar behavioral manifestations within the context of sexual acts. A third element in the relationship between sex and aggression is that they are frequently connected in the public domain. They often are linked together as central themes in literature, drama and the media in general. In many cultures, the extent and degree of societal concern about and suppression of one of these activities parallels the other.

Pornographic* literature seems to contain a high proportion of aggressive material. A *Time Magazine* cover story on pornography reported that the “taboo currently under the heaviest assault is sado-masochism — sexual pleasure derived from domination and inflicting pain on a partner or from being hurt.” (April 5, 1976, p. 61).

The present experiments were designed to assess the effect of manipulating aggressive cues within an erotic passage on sexual arousal. This variation was not intended to involve hostile aggression, but rather aggressivity akin to assertive aggression as described by Fromm (1973) and Bach and Goldberg (1974).

* The terms pornography and erotica are used interchangeably here without any pejorative meaning necessarily intended.

However, it is recognized that the distinction between hostile and assertive aggression is not always clear-cut. Inasmuch as the aggressive cues inserted in the passage were intended to predominantly reflect assertive, instrumental aggression, it was predicted that the presence of aggressive cues would be associated with increased sexual responsiveness.

EXPERIMENT 1

Materials

A one-page (248-word) description of sexual intercourse between consenting adults was compiled from several novels. A total of ten words was varied to manipulate the aggressive cues and thereby create two versions of the same story. In selecting these words to systematically manipulate, considerable care was taken not to alter the essential meaning of the passage. Some examples of this variation are: (a torrent) vs (an assault) of forceful thrusts; (hugging) vs (forcing) him to her; (intense) vs (hard-locked) embrace; (pressed) vs (slammed) his body; (drove) vs (stabbed) the hardened member.

In order to provide validation for this experimental manipulation, fourteen judges were asked to rate on eight-point scales the connotation of the randomly presented words manipulated in the study. These judges were unfamiliar with the purpose of the experiment, but they were informed that the words were taken from an erotic passage and that their ratings should take the context into consideration. The results of these ratings indicated that the “aggressive” words were judged to be significantly more aggressive, antagonistic, and dominant than the “nonaggressive” words, thereby providing support for the intended variation.

Subjects’ reactions to the reading materials were assessed by means of a Mood Check List. This form consisted of eleven descriptors of various moods. Two items concerned sexual responsiveness: the first referred to feelings of sexual arousal or being “turned on” whereas the other, appearing at the end of the questionnaire, referred to feeling “sexually tantalized or sensuous.” It was reasoned that, while similar, the first item would be more likely to be associated with a clearly discernible response, whereas the latter would reflect a more diffuse state of sexual arousal. Other items concerned feelings such as boredom, anxiety, embarrassment, positive affect, and negative affect. For each mood description, the subject was to check one of nine points on a scale ranging from “none at all” to “extremely.”

Since the primary dependent measure of the present investigation consisted of self-reported sexual arousal, some discussion of the validity of these self-reports is warranted. For nondeviant populations, self-reported sexual arousal has been consistently found to correlate highly with genital measures (e.g., Heiman, 1977; Abel, Barlow, Blanchard, & Guild, 1977; Schaefer, Treggerthan, & Colgan,

242 Aggressive Cues and Sexual Arousal to Erotica

1976). In general, both with the use of physiological and self-report measures, more confidence may be attached to the validity of indications of sexual arousal than to the absence of such indications, since subjects may be capable of inhibiting as well as hiding arousal (Amoroso & Brown, 1973; Abel & Blanchard, 1976; Henson & Rubin, 1971). Typically, discrepancies between self-reports and genital measures are far more likely in the direction of underestimating rather than overestimating arousal via self-reports (Schaefer et al., 1976; Abel et al., 1977). It would seem therefore, that considerable confidence may be attached to self-reports of the existence of sexual arousal.

A separate questionnaire inquired about subjects' backgrounds. Participants were asked to respond to multiple-choice questions concerning their sex, age, occupations, yearly income, marital status, education, and frequency of reading "adult" books.

Subjects and Procedure

Sixty-two male subjects were individually approached in a Hollywood bookstore by the male experimenter.* The data of two subjects was eliminated because of failure to complete the questionnaires.

The bookstore contained both nonerotic and pornographic materials; only those subjects scanning materials in the "adults only" section were approached. The experimenter introduced himself as representing a local publishing company that was interested in obtaining evaluations of erotic materials that might be worthy of publication. He asked the subjects if they would be willing to read a one-page excerpt from an erotic manuscript and anonymously report their reactions. Upon consenting, subjects were given a packet with the front page reading "Fairbanks Publishing Company, Hollywood, California." The second page consisted of either the relatively aggressive or nonaggressive version of the erotic passage, with subjects being randomly assigned to conditions. The third and last page provided an opportunity for the gathering of the background information. After subjects returned the materials, they were thanked for their help and the experimenter answered any inquiries.**

Results

Background data

Analyses of background data provided both a check on the random assignment to experimental conditions and information on characteristics of the

* The authors wish to express their gratitude to Mr. Larry Steinberg for permission to conduct the experiment in his bookstore.

** The owner of the bookstore asked that participants not be briefed as to the real purpose of the experiment unless they asked for more information following the completion of the questionnaires. Only one subject did so, and was fully briefed.

sample. Demographic data and related responses in the two experimental conditions were very similar; statistical comparisons with the use of *t* tests indicated only negligible effects. These background data therefore provided clear support for the intended randomization.

The mean age of the participants was 31, with a standard deviation of 9.9; subjects ranged in age from 18 to 64 years. With respect to yearly income, 13% reported earning \$20,000 or more, 39% between \$10,000-\$20,000, 25% between \$5,000-\$10,000, and 21% less than \$5,000. The majority was single, about 40% indicating that they were currently married. Seventy-one percent reported not having any children. Slightly more than 56% reported having completed or being enrolled in a four-year college; 26% completed or were enrolled in a junior college; the remaining 17% had graduated from high school. With respect to the frequency of reading such materials, 35% indicated once or less a year, 51% on a monthly basis, 8% on a weekly basis, and only 6% on a daily basis.

Mood ratings

A comparison of subjects' mood ratings revealed a significant difference on the item "sexually tantalized or sensuous" $t(58) = 2.30, p < .02$, one-tailed. Subjects who read the story with the more aggressive cues reported feeling more sexually tantalized than those reading the other version of the same story. While those who read the former version also reported considerably higher levels of general arousal and positive affect, these differences did not approach acceptable levels of significance. Differences on other mood items, including that of "sexual arousal," were negligible.

Discussion

The results obtained within the "natural" field setting used provide interesting information regarding the responses of individuals likely to seek out sexually explicit materials. Although subjects' background information generally indicates that this was not a particularly atypical sample of the male population, the reported frequency of reading "adult" books would seem somewhat greater than that in the general population.

The results were partially consistent with the prediction that an increase in aggressive cues would result in enhanced sexual responsiveness. Subjects reading the version of the erotic story containing the more aggressive cues indicated feeling more "sexually tantalized and sensuous" than their counterparts who read the nonaggressive version. No significant differences were found, however, on the item asking subjects how "sexually aroused or turned on" they felt. It would seem that the participants interpreted these items differently, despite the apparent similarities between them. In any case, comparisons of the effects of these two erotic passage versions upon other populations seemed warranted.

EXPERIMENT 2

The second experiment was also designed to assess the effects of aggressive cues in erotica. The subject population studied included both males and females taken from a very different setting than the sample in the first experiment. Since, as described below, the nature of the experiences of males and females differed within this experiment, differences between the genders cannot be attributed to the sex variable per se. However, differences within each gender between reactions to the aggressive vs the nonaggressive passage versions can be meaningfully interpreted.

Method

Subjects and experimental conditions

There were 99 males and 115 female adult subjects, ranging in age from 21 to 60, who participated in the experiment. It was conducted during a guest lecture of a class meeting of two sections of a UCLA extension class entitled: "Pairing—The Search for Intimacy."*

This extension course included one hour of laboratory discussion and one lecture hour. The experiment was conducted during the lecture period. Subjects in the earlier of the two class sections participated in the laboratory discussion prior to the experiment, whereas the other section did not participate in the discussion until after the experiment. This discussion lasted close to an hour and consisted of the female participants revealing what they considered sexual "turn-ons" and "turn-offs" while the male participants listened.

The central manipulation of this study was essentially the same variation of aggressive cues within erotic reading material as that used in the first experiment. Subjects read a slightly revised one page description of the sexual intercourse used in the first study. A total of ten words were once again varied to alter the aggressive cues and thereby create two versions of the same story.

Degree of anxiety about aggression was considered a potentially important variable with respect to the variation in aggressivity. All subjects were administered an Aggression-Anxiety Scale (Feshbach & Singer, 1971; Feshbach, Stiles & Bitter, 1967), in which respondents are presented with thirty true-false items, eleven of which are "filler" items. Scores could range from 0-19, higher scores reflecting greater aggression-anxiety. Scores on this scale were split at the median, 10 for males and 11 for females, so as to separate subjects into high and low aggression-anxiety groups.

* The authors wish to express their appreciation to Dr. George Bach, who had invited Dr. Feshbach to his class on "Pairing," for the strong personal support he gave to the idea of a demonstrational study and for his continued encouragement of systematic research in this area.

Procedure

Subjects were seated in a large lecture hall and, as part of a classroom exercise, given three pages. The first page filled out was the Aggression-Anxiety Scale, described to subjects as a personality inventory. Then subjects were asked to read the second page, the erotic passage. Some subjects received the erotic excerpt that contained relatively nonaggressive wording, while others received the more aggressively worded passage. Subjects were instructed that immediately following the passage reading they were to complete the third page, the Mood Check List. When all of the subjects were finished, they were asked to pass the attached pages to the front of the room and, following the collection of these materials, the experiment was explained and discussed in detail.

Results

Randomization of subjects

As a check on the random distribution of subjects in the various experimental conditions, a three-way ANOVA varying the Aggressive Content, Discussion Section, and Sex of Subject was performed on the scores of the Aggression-Anxiety Scale. A significant main effect, $F = 12.36$, $p < .001$ was obtained for subject's sex, with females evidencing higher scores.* The existence of only negligible effects for the other variables suggests that subjects were quite randomly distributed across conditions.

Mood ratings

In this study, the "sexual arousal" and "sexually tantalized" items yielded very similar results; all of the effects that were significant or approached significance with one of the items did so with the other as well. While the effects are stronger if responses to both adjectives are combined, given the results of the first experiment, the analyses for each item were kept separate. For the sake of parsimony, only the data for the "sexual arousal" rating will be presented. It is not clear why, in contrast to the first experiment, subjects in the second study responded very similarly to both of the items dealing with sexual responsiveness.

The mean ratings of the "sexual arousal" item are presented in Figure 13.1. A four-way analysis of variance (Aggressive Content x Discussion Section x Aggression-Anxiety x Subject's Sex) performed on these data indicated a main effect for the Aggressive Content manipulation ($F = 7.46$, $p < .007$), with increased aggressivity resulting in greater sexual arousal. As Figure 13.1 reveals, however, and as indicated by a three-way interaction that approached significance ($F = 2.88$, $p < .10$) between the Aggressive Content, Discussion and Sex of Subject varia-

* Unless otherwise indicated, all of the data reported involved 1/198 degrees of freedom.

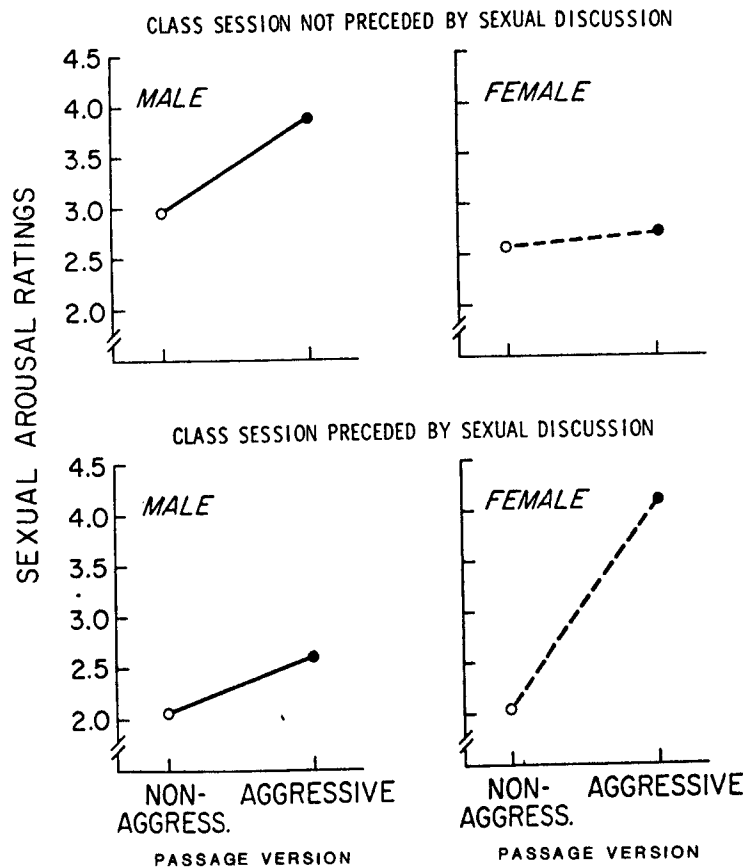


Figure 13.1 A four way analysis of variance

bles, the increased sexual arousal with the aggressive version of the erotic passage occurred mainly and dramatically in females who had earlier participated in a disinhibiting discussion. Simple analyses effects comparing females who read the aggressive vs nonaggressive version within the discussion condition yielded a highly significant effect $F(1,50) = 12.61, p < .001$. Males who had not earlier listened to the discussion showed a similar, though nonsignificant effect $F(1,48) = 1.79, p < .10$. Females who had not participated in the self-disclosing discussion (Second Class Session) and males who had been observers of the female discussion (First Class Session) evidenced little difference in their responses to the two passage versions.

Similar patterns were observed in other mood items. Subjects who read the more aggressive version indicated feeling more positive, ($F = 4.14, p < .05$) and frustrated ($F = 7.40, p < .01$) than their counterparts who had read the less aggressive erotic reading. Interaction effects among the Aggressive Content, Discussion Section and Sex of Subject variables were found for positive affect ($F = 9.67, p < .002$), negative affect ($F = 4.93, p < .03$) and on general arousal ($F = 4.91, p < .01$). These data revealed, in keeping with the sexual arousal data, that females who had not participated in the frank discussion and males who had listened to the discussion showed little differences in their reactions to the two versions of the passage. Males who had not listened to the revealing discussion, and to a greater extent females who participated in the discussion, indicated feeling more generally aroused and positive, and expressed less negative affect after having read the more aggressive as contrasted with the less aggressive version of the passage.

Additional interesting effects emerged that were not related to the aggressivity manipulation. The sexual arousal data also yielded an interaction effect between the sex of subject and discussion variables ($F = 4.44, p < .05$). This effect revealed that females who had not earlier participated in the discussion reported less sexual arousal than males, irrespective of the version of the story they had read. For those who had engaged in the self-disclosure experience, the pattern is the reverse, with females being the more sexually aroused. Additional data, however, suggest that the effects of the discussion were particularly pronounced for some subjects: an interaction effect between the Discussion and Aggression-Anxiety variables approached significance for sexual arousal ($F = 3.54, p < .06$), and for the "ability to think clearly" ($F = 2.73, p < .10$) items and was significant for self-reported anxiety ($F = 4.10, p < .05$). For those subjects who did not attend the personal discussion prior to the experiment, we find low aggression-anxious subjects reporting somewhat greater sexual arousal and anxiety and lessened ability to think clearly than subjects high in aggression-anxiety. The reverse pattern is found in subjects who had earlier attended the discussion—high aggression-anxiety individuals report being more sexually aroused and anxious and less able to think clearly than low aggression-anxiety subjects.

A second-order interaction between the Discussion, Aggression-Anxiety and Sex of Subject variables that approached significance ($F = 3.25, p < .07$) further clarifies the first-order interactions in revealing that the discussion particularly affected high aggression-anxiety females. That is, for males there are only slight differences in the sexual arousal reports of low and high aggression-anxious subjects, regardless of whether they did or did not listen to the discussion. For females, among those who did not discuss their sexual preferences, low aggression-anxiety subjects report slightly higher sexual arousal than high aggression-anxious subjects. In contrast, for those female subjects who had earlier engaged

248 Aggressive Cues and Sexual Arousal to Erotica

in the revealing discussion, we find that it is the high aggression-anxiety subjects who report considerably greater sexual arousal ($F(1,50) = 7.12, p < .025$).

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study are consistent with the expectation that the variation of aggressive content in erotic reading matter will significantly affect its sexual arousal properties. This research was conducted in a nonlaboratory setting with subjects who were older than the usual college samples. Most of the subjects were or had been married and were participating in the course in which the study was conducted primarily for experiential and growth purposes. Many were uninterested in research and some were explicitly antagonistic to "science." Nevertheless, meaningful differences were yielded by the variation of aggressive content.

More specifically, the sexual arousal data of the study may be summarized as follows:

1. For subjects who had not earlier engaged in a self-disclosing sexual discussion, male subjects reported greater sexual arousal than females.
2. The results for subjects who had been involved in a self-disclosing discussion are quite different. It should be again noted that differences between males and females may be a function of their different roles within the discussion as well as their gender (or an interaction between these two factors). After having self-disclosed their sexual "turn-ons" and "turn-offs," female subjects reported more sexual arousal than the male subjects (who had listened to the females' discussion). Moreover, the reading of the more aggressive version of the passage resulted in females reporting much higher levels of sexual arousal, general arousal, and positive affect as compared with those females who had read the less aggressive version; for males, there is only a very slight trend for differences in this direction.
3. Subjects' aggression-anxiety levels, particularly for females, revealed some relationship with the impact of the discussion. High aggression-anxious females who had not participated in the discussion indicated slightly less sexual arousal than low aggression-anxious females. With respect to subjects who had prior to the experiment participated in the discussion, high aggression-anxious females indicated levels of sexual arousal that were considerably higher than those of the low aggression-anxiety females. Somewhat similar but weak trends were noted for males.

While these results need to be very cautiously interpreted in light of the fact that except for the variation in aggressive content the independent variables of the present study were of a correlational rather than an experimental nature (i.e., subjects were not randomly assigned to the Sex of Subject, Discussion, or Ag-

gression-Anxiety conditions), some intriguing possibilities emerge. The data may well be interpreted as implicating the role of inhibitory and disinhibitory factors. The disinhibitory effects of the aggressive cues may emanate from their "taboo" properties and their presentation by the experimenter may serve to communicate a relatively uninhibited, "permissive" attitude that may generalize to sexual responses. Or, perceived physiological and behavioral similarities in features of sexual and aggressive responses may result in the aggressive stimuli being interpreted within the sexual interaction as reflecting intensity of interaction or even passion. It would seem difficult to think of another context in which phrases such as "an assault," "stabbing" or "forcing" would be perceived as anything but purely aggressive. However, within a sexual context, such descriptions may be perceived as uninhibited sexuality.

The fact that heightened sexual arousal tended to be accompanied by increased self-reported anxiety is not necessarily incompatible with a disinhibition interpretation. Firstly, disinhibition may result in greater willingness to acknowledge and report feelings of sexual arousal and of anxiety. Secondly, if one assumes that there is an approach-avoidance gradient in connection with sexual stimuli such that there tends to be greater anxiety with greater sexual arousal, then disinhibition as a function of the inclusion of aggressive stimuli or participation in a sexual discussion may facilitate sexual arousal and result in heightened anxiety resulting from the new level of sexual arousal. Clark's (1952) studies seem compatible with this analysis, in that those disinhibiting experimental conditions that elicited higher levels of sexual motives on the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) also resulted in increases in sex-guilt themes.

The suggestion that aggressive cues serve as a "turn-off" of inhibition rather than a "turn-on" of sexual arousal did not receive unequivocal support, however, since a significant interaction was not found between subjects' levels of aggression-anxiety and the manipulation of aggressivity. The data may also be interpreted as indicating that aggressive stimuli in the context of erotica have stimulating effects rather than effects mediated by disinhibition. This distinction, though of importance, is operationally difficult to disentangle.

With respect to the discussion, the data suggests that the more inhibited subjects were the most influenced by it. Following the sexual discussion, high aggression-anxiety subjects, particularly females, were more sexually aroused than low aggression-anxious subjects, whereas the differences were in the opposite direction for subjects who had not participated in the discussion. These data are consistent with a study by Fisher and Byrne (1978).

These investigators report that subjects who had relatively phobic reactions to pornography (erotophobes) showed significant behavioral changes in sexual activity following exposure to explicit sexual stimuli. Subjects who had relatively positive reactions to pornography (erotophiles), on the other hand, showed rela-

250 Aggressive Cues and Sexual Arousal to Erotica

tively high levels of sexual activity that were unaffected by exposure to pornography.

Future research should attempt to analyze some of the cognitive associations that may mediate a sex-aggression link. For example, some subjects may link virility with aggressivity. Similarly, the assertion of dominance through aggression may be associated for some individuals with idealized cultural sex roles. It is necessary to study the effects of varying aspects of erotic literature to determine whether dimensions such as assertive aggression, dominance, or perceived virility can best account for the effects of these stimuli in erotic contexts. The technique employed in the present studies, the systematic subtle variation of the passage content, would seem to readily lend itself to the investigation of a wide range of aggressive stimuli.

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