

The Story of Ohh!

Reprinted from *The Guardian*

Wednesday April 28, 2004

For men it is quick, easy and essential for reproduction. For women, it is slow, difficult and purely for pleasure. Yet despite such differences, it brings the sexes together and is the basis of the monogamy that distinguishes us from other animals. In his new book, Jonathan Margolis examines the phenomenon of the orgasm.

"The desire for intercourse is the genius of the genus," wrote the 19th-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. But what a complex genius it is. By virtue of a series of devilishly clever evolutionary tricks, or perhaps due to sheer happenstance shaped by cultural factors, women and men have quite different sexual desires, different sexual experiences and different sexual aims. And they probably always have done.

For one thing, as men and women must equally be aware, they do not actually need one another to enjoy orgasm. Yet since prehistory, these two very different tribes have continued to seek out one another's company and spend their lives broadly together, centring a large part of their shared existence on an activity - sexual intercourse - of which they have a very different experience.

It is axiomatic that women fall in love first and discover lust later, while men fall in lust and only subsequently learn to love. Indeed, it is a close-run thing whether the most striking disparity between the male and female yearning for orgasm is emotional or physical. The orgasmic spasm lasts a few seconds to a minute at the most, but is accompanied by intense physiological activity. Genitals swell with blood, the pulse races, muscles contract involuntarily. Some people's mouths open. Others' faces contort. Many women's toes curl. In men, big toes often stiffen as their little toes twist. Both partners' feet may arch and shake. Sweat typically surfaces on both participants' brows, the heart pumps frantically, and breathing becomes fast and shallow. Both partners' nostrils may flare and seem to heat the air as it surges through them. With climax, each partner is clenched by contractions at consistent 0.8 second intervals. The human sexual summit is a paroxysm of pleasure. A warm glow envelops the waist and chest. The toes relax.

The emotions, too, generally go into a seismic convulsion. For attempting, or pretending to attempt, to add to the species, both parties have received their reward. A mist of goodwill, wellbeing and lazy relaxation temporarily obscures reality. Both men and women may laugh or cry, or become uncommonly ticklish, although all these reactions are less common for men on the basis that they tend to show their feelings less anyway. Both sexes may experience a burst of creative thought since orgasm produces a near lightning storm in the right, creative-thinking side of the brain. Biological duty fulfilled, there normally follows a lengthy period of exhaustion, rest, and - frequently - sleep.

All of this has a good deal to do with oxytocin, the "hormone of love" as it has been called. Oxytocin is a neurotransmitter synthesised by the hypothalamus at the base of the brain and stored in the posterior pituitary, from where it pulses out when required, which is during sexual activity and in childbirth, after which it prompts the

desire to nuzzle and protect infants. Oxytocin induces feelings of love and altruism, warmth, calm, bonding, tenderness and togetherness, of satisfaction during bodily contact, sexual arousal and sexual fulfilment. It is during orgasm in both men and women that oxytocin floods through our bloodstream. Oxytocin released by female orgasm helps women lie still for a while afterwards. This increases the likelihood of conception, as well as making it probable that women will seek further coitus because they enjoyed it so much.

Oxytocin is nature's sugar-coating to disguise the bitter pill of reproduction, the chemical basis for our capacity and longing for romantic attachment. It is the molecule that for 100,000 years or more has made us want to have sex face-to-face, adoring one another, and to live in permanent, monogamous couples - the latter otherwise done only by one species of ape, the bonobo, an endangered chimpanzee existing in small numbers in the Congo and believed to be the closest primate to humankind. Albatrosses, swans, a handful of crustaceans and a rare New Zealand songbird called the hihi also "mate for life" - but not for remotely "romantic" reasons.

Men and women get pleasure from oxytocin, but otherwise there are fundamental inconsistencies between the two genders' orgasms. The most glaring in heterosexual intercourse is that men's orgasms are practically essential for reproduction, whereas women's do not have any obvious function other than to be pleasurable. The most basic physical disparities between the male and the female orgasm are the most conspicuous. Typical male orgasm lasts no more than a couple of seconds, while in women, climaxes of up to a minute are known. But the difference in time taken to reach orgasm is even more significant. "For perhaps three-quarters of all males, orgasm is reached within two minutes after the initiation of the sexual relation," observed Kinsey in his 1948 sexological debut, *Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male*.

Men, moreover, are virtually assured orgasmic climaxes, but more often than not, the male mechanism is far too swift and efficient to give a female partner even a slender chance of a "classic", penetration-induced orgasm. As a result of the clitoris being sited in the wrong place to be adequately stimulated by straight reproductive intercourse, orgasm for women is nearly always produced by a masturbatory mechanism. But as if to compensate for this rather unfair-seeming physical mismatch, nature has intriguingly made the female orgasm produced by masturbation far and away the more intense.

It is in the arena of the emotions that the gap between male and female orgasmic expectations and feelings widens still further. Whether this was the case for our preliterate ancestors is a matter for conjecture, but the evidence from surviving primitive tribes suggests that there has always been such a gulf. Generally, human males tend to have a high interest in orgasm, placing less importance on relationships, coupling, security and monogamy, while females tend to prioritise relationships, coupling, security and monogamy over mechanical orgasmic satisfaction per se.

For a zoologist such as Tim Birkhead, author of *Promiscuity: An Evolutionary History of Sperm Competition and Sexual Conflict*, this disparity has a biological rationale; males, for Birkhead, are interested principally in how many eggs they can fertilise, women in who fertilises them. Donald Symons, professor of anthropology at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and author of *The Evolution of Human*

Sexuality, prefers a maxim from WH Auden to sum up the disparity: "Men are playboys, women realists."

For other scientists, the core sexual discrepancy between men and women is a matter of design. Stephen Jay Gould believed the clitoral orgasm is a paradox for Darwinian biology. Evolutionary theory, Gould argued, dictates that the female orgasm should be a clear incentive for attempting to reproduce. "How can our world be functional and Darwinian if the site of our orgasm is divorced from the place of intercourse? How can sexual pleasure be so separated from its functional significance in the Darwinian game of life?" he wrote.

In the few decades that such matters have been a suitable subject for serious discourse, three distinct theories have been put forward to explain the central problem that Gould articulated. The first, classical theory, advanced by Desmond Morris, is that the female orgasm has evolved to enhance the monogamous pair bond and make family life more rewarding. This is because only a long-term, stable male partner will know how to make a particular woman climax properly.

The cultural, learned aspect of female orgasm is amplified by our propensity for love at an emotional and intellectual level. Anthropologist Helen Fisher points out that, despite its name, the missionary position is not a western imposition but the preferred copulatory posture in most cultures. So, argues Fisher, it seems that the peculiar human arrangement of forward-tilting vagina and face-to-face sex may have evolved as it has to encourage social copulation, where partners can see each other and communicate with intimacy and understanding.

The second theory, advanced by many feminists, also holds that the female orgasm is an evolutionary adaptation, but that it is triggered by nothing more elaborate than straight intercourse; if it is not, there is either something abnormal about the woman - or inadequate about the man. The female's ability to multi-orgasm without the subdued "refractory" period the male goes through after ejaculation is additionally, to this school of thought, evidence of an almost insatiable sexual desire in women. For these theorists, monogamy is an unnatural instrument of political repression. The third view of the female orgasm, proposed by the postmodern voice of Symons and heartily backed by Gould, is that a whole nexus of anatomical, social, cultural and emotional factors make female orgasm the subtle phenomenon it is. They propose that female orgasm is the happy coincidence of an existing, but minor, bodily quirk resulting from the physiological similarity of the sexes in the womb - an echo, in other words, of the male orgasm - and a cultural artifice no more adaptive than a learned ability such as writing.

The view of female orgasm Symons favours is that the phenomenon is a relic, a kind of echo of the male orgasm. As Gould elaborated: "The reason for a clitoral site of orgasm is simple - exactly comparable with the non-puzzle of male nipples. The clitoris is the homologue of the penis - it is the same organ, endowed with the same anatomical organisation and capacity of response."

According to the Morris et al theory, the female orgasm is a natural process that can only work by the non-instinctive, learned application of fingers, toes, noses, mouths, whatever, to the clitoris, and by males making a determined effort to think of the previous week's football results in an attempt to avoid ejaculating too early. If this all sounds a little "unnatural", it might explain the taboos that have surrounded such forms of manually and mentally assisted sex.

But the nature of the female orgasm can now be seen in a new light: as a selective mechanism for women to choose mates not as an animal would - by body size, ferocity and aggressiveness - but by qualities such as intellect, sensitivity, kindness and popularity, plus not a little dexterity. No wonder Darwin said: "The power to charm the female has sometimes been more important than the power to conquer other males in battle."

Neat though it is, the Morris argument tends to be regarded today as a little overstated and seemingly designed to provide an evolutionary justification for marriage. Morris's "pair bond" notion and the feminists' "insatiable female" theories are, furthermore, contiguous, differing only in their conceptions of the ideal - for feminists, a paradise of endless sexual indulgence, for Morris a nirvana of sexually intense monogamy.

Both theories, for Symons, exist only in the human imagination. As the celebrated anthropologist Margaret Mead also noted, Symons says, in cultures such as that of Samoa, where foreplay is encouraged, all women orgasm; but in cultures where foreplay is forbidden, or you have to be clothed to have sex, the potentiality for orgasm may be universally untapped.

"It is important to realise," Mead concluded, "that such an unrealised potentiality is not necessarily felt as frustration." Or, as Symons noted acidly: "The sexually insatiable woman is to be found primarily, if not exclusively, in the ideology of feminism, the hopes of boys and the fears of men."

This is an edited extract from O: The Intimate History of the Orgasm by Jonathan Margolis, published by Century on May 6