

Summary of:

Fisher, T.D., Moore, Z. T. & Pittenger, M.J. (2012). Sex on the brain?: An examination of frequency of sexual cognitions as a function of gender, erotophilia and social desirability. *Journal of Sex Research, 49*(1), 69-77.

Summary by Natasha Frakes, Eleni Rodriguez, and Tiffany Hunter
For Dr. Mills Psych 310 Class

There is a societal assumption, it seems, that men are constantly thinking about sex and that it all they are really every thinking about. This study done by Fisher, Moore and Pittenger is aimed to identify whether or not sexual cognition really is greater in average males and than it is in females. Sexual cognition in this respect refers to the “fleeting sexual thoughts or images, more elaborate and ongoing sexual fantasies, sexual thought that are experiences as intrusive, and sexual thoughts and fantasies that are engaged in deliberately.” Recognizing that there have been other studies that monitor this same type of thought behavior, the researchers looked to those studies as guides to how to make their research methodologies better. This particular study of sexual cognition differences between men and women asked the participants to monitor not only sexual thoughts, but also thoughts about food and sleep to be used as the control sample. The researched wanted to determine whether or not the difference in sexual cognition was due solely to sex differences or if there were other contributing factors to the quantity of thoughts, such as societal pressure or other biological functions.

There were a total of 283 participants, 163 female and 120 male. The participants ranged in age from 18-25; a traditional college demographic was used because they have shown to have the most sex differences. The vast majority of participants identified as white and heterosexual. Three hypothesis were made by the researchers: 1. There would be a sex difference in frequency for the total tally count of sexual cognitions, 2. Males would provide a high estimate for their sexual thought frequency than females. 3. Female reports about sex and eating would negatively relate to their social desirability scores because of social roles and stereotypes. The methods used to for the findings were questionnaires and the golf tally counter to count sexual cognitive thoughts. The primary questionnaire was used to measure eating, sleeping and sexual behaviors of the participants as well as their background demographics. A second questionnaire, the Sexual Opinion Survey, was implemented to measure the degree of agreement and disagreement about emotional orientation to sexuality. Two more surveys were also used to measure the degree of participants need for social acceptance and their sociosexual orientation. They then divided participants into groups, anonymously, and assigned them to tally their thoughts on either sleep, food or sex. Participants then went about their daily activities and were asked to tally their thoughts with the golf tally counter.

The main results found were as follows,

“Men’s and women’s retrospective estimates of sexual cognition frequency were similar in range, with a daily maximum of 50 for both sexes, but the median estimate for men was five thoughts per day compared to the median of three for women. The average daily tally counts revealed greater differences in range, with the

maximum for men being 388 compared to 140 for women. The median daily tally count for men was 18.6 compared to a median of 9.9 for women.”

However, after analyzing all the data, there was a significant finding in regard to the relationship between variables of social desirability, sociosexuality and erotophilia. Social desirability accounts for the level of which people feel the need to be accepted in the greater society, sociosexuality is the level of willingness a person has to engage in casual sex encounters, and erotophilia is the level of openness and positivity towards sex talk. The discovery here was the only women were found to have a significant relationship between those variables; being that women with low social desirability and high erotophilia scores reported high numbers of sexual cognitions. This is explained in the fact that women who care less about social acceptability and are more open to sex talk were less ashamed and more willing and likely to report they had sexual cognitions throughout the day.

Overall, this study showed that while men do show a dominance in thinking about sex on a daily basis, men also are more inclined to think about food and sleep on the daily, other need-related variables. Results further showed that participants either underestimated or underreported their frequency for need-related cognitions, such as food and sleep, and that can explain why there was such a significant sex difference in the estimations to the tally results. The hypothesis made about female reports of sexual cognitions being negatively related to their social desirability scores was proven correct through the study. The hypothesis about estimates being high for males and low for females was incorrect, for all estimates made by both men and women showed to be under the reported tally. Finally, the study allowed the researchers to discover that yes, there is a sex difference in frequency tally counts for sexual cognitions between men and women, but that there is also a sex difference in tall counts for other need-related thoughts. Therefore, there is still uncertainty whether or not the difference is accounted for reluctance to report, biological factors or whether men and women generally conceptualize thoughts differently.

Critically speaking, while this study did provide relevant findings and a clear methodology, there are some things that can be seen as indicators of imperfect research. First off, while the choice to use a sample group of traditional college students made sense in the fact that they may provide the most sex difference, the results may also be skewed because it is during those years that people experience the highest spouts of hormonal acceleration. Furthermore, in time of college, the need-related thoughts of food and sleep are also usually more prominent in students mind. Also, by allowing the participants to self report their thoughts, there is still room for them to manipulate how often or infrequent they had those thoughts, or if they had a thought and forgot to tally it. If there was some piece of technology that could tally their thoughts without the participant having to do it themselves, that may provide the best results.