

## The Sexual Vocabularies of Heterosexual and Homosexual Males and Females for Communicating Erotically With a Sexual Partner

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*This study explored what terminology constitutes an erotic or arousing language for male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, and the extent to which that language is used with a sexual partner. Five sexual references were included: male genitalia, female genitalia, lovemaking/coitus, oral-genital contact, and hand-genital contact. Respondents consisted of 120 urban mid-western university students, 30 in each gender and sexual orientation category. Sexual orientation was as powerful a predictor as gender for language that was considered erotic. Lesbians and gay males more often than heterosexual females and males used erotic or arousing vocabulary with a spouse or lover. Gay males more often used slang with a spouse or lover than did heterosexual males and heterosexual females. Implications for sexual arousal based upon communication are discussed.*

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**KEY WORDS:** erotic communication; sexual orientation; gender; erotic communication.

### INTRODUCTION

Previous research has shown that male and female use different terminology to describe sexual behaviors and sexual anatomy in various intimate (Sanders, 1978) and social contexts, including with a spouse or lover (Simkins and Rinck, 1982). MacDougald (1961) first noted that the use of erotic words during sexual intercourse can evoke negative, neutral, or positive reactions in heterosexual arousal. No previous investigation has examined the

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extent to which vocabulary that is considered erotic or arousing is used with a sexual partner or has included sexual orientation as a variable. Only recently have differences in the use of sexual language in various interpersonal contexts been reported between heterosexuals and homosexuals with results indicating that sexual orientation is a significant variable (Wells, 1989).

Masters and Johnson (1979) suggested that lesbian and gay couples, when compared to heterosexual couples, talk with each other more often about what they want and like sexually. Their findings state that homosexual couples are less performance- or goal-oriented in their sexual interactions as well as less distracted by noises and other people when involved in sex play than are heterosexual couples. In this same research, comparing arousal techniques between homosexual and heterosexual couples, they reported that the former attend more to style of sexual interaction and take longer to give and receive sexual pleasure, i.e., more hugging, caressing, kissing, oral-genital stimulation, and full-body contact. Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) reported that heterosexuals are more constrained than homosexuals by traditional sexual roles. Symons (1979) also argued that lesbian and gay male sexual behavior represents a stereotypically pure form of male and female sexuality in that socialized masculine and feminine sexual behaviors are carried out in the context of a same-sex relationship. Symons suggested that in heterosexual relationships, male and female compromise their true sexual natures.

Because physical sexual arousal techniques have been reported to be different between heterosexuals and homosexuals, even though physiological arousal responses are identical, and because sexual terminology usage differs between male and female as well as between heterosexual and homosexual, the following hypotheses were proposed:

1. Gay males, lesbians, heterosexual males, and heterosexual females will differ on what constitutes erotic or arousing language.
2. Agreement of terms considered erotic or arousing and the use of those terms with a spouse or lover will be greater for lesbians and gay males than for heterosexuals.
3. Verbal sexual communication, use of erotic or arousing words, and the use of slang during sexual interaction will be greater for homosexuals than for heterosexuals.

The purpose of this investigation is to identify sexual terminology that represents erotic or arousing language in intimate relationships for female and male who identify themselves as either homosexual or heterosexual. Further, this study seeks to determine the use and amount of erotic verbal communication in sexual relationships as it relates to gender and sexual orientation.

## METHOD

### Subjects

Respondents were 120 urban midwestern undergraduate university students, 96 of whom were enrolled in a human sexuality class and 24 who were members of the gay-lesbian organization on campus. Data were collected in human sexuality courses on a volunteer basis for credit over two semesters with a total of 210 heterosexual males, 225 heterosexual females, 13 lesbians, and 23 gay males responding ( $N = 471$ ) out of a total enrollment of 483 students. Participants clipped a card to the questionnaire with their name on it when returning it. The name card was removed from the questionnaires after credit was recorded for anonymity. Through the campus gay-lesbian organization, 17 more lesbians ( $n = 30$ ) and 21 additional gay males ( $n = 44$ ) participated. Since the lesbian sample was 30, that served as a base number upon which to randomly select respondents from the other three groups. Thus, 30 heterosexual male questionnaires were pulled from the total of 210; 30 heterosexual female questionnaires were pulled from the total of 225; and 30 gay male questionnaires were pulled from the total of 44, so that each of the four groups comprised 30 students. The mean age for each group of 30 was heterosexual males, 22.1; gay males, 22.9; heterosexual females, 21.4; and lesbians, 22.0 years old.

### Procedure

Students were asked to self-rate their sexual orientation on the 7-point Kinsey Rating Scale (Kinsey *et al.*, 1948) by using 0 as representing exclusively heterosexual to 6 as representing exclusively homosexual. All 60 heterosexual students self-rated themselves as 0. Lesbians and gay males self-rated their sexual orientation as 5 (17 female and 9 male) or 6 (13 female and 21 male), predominantly homosexual-insignificantly heterosexual and exclusively homosexual, respectively, with a mean of 5.4 for lesbians and 5.7 for gay males.

The questionnaire used was an expanded version of one part of Sanders' (1978) questionnaire which asked students to write the word they would use with a spouse or lover to indicate male genitalia, female genitalia, and coitus. Oral-genital contact and hand-genital contact were added to the questionnaire in this study. If students would not engage in such a discussion or would rely on nonverbal cues, they were to leave the response area blank.

Respondents were also asked to write the word that for them was considered the most erotic or arousing for the same three terms representing sexual behaviors and two terms representing male and female genitalia. If students had never had a spouse or a lover, they were asked to write the word that they expected that they would most likely use for each of the three sexual behaviors and male and female genitalia. Additionally, students were asked to answer three questions about their participation in sexual conversation with a spouse or lover during sexual interaction by using a 10-point scale with 1 interpreted as meaning *never* and 10 as *always*. The three questions were (i) "When I am engaged in lovemaking/coitus, I talk to my sexual partner about what we are doing"; (ii) "When I am engaged in lovemaking/coitus I say 'sexy' or arousing words to my sexual partner"; and (iii) "When I am engaged in lovemaking/coitus, I use slang/four-letter words to talk to my sexual partner."

Three methods of analyzing the data were employed. Rank order by percentage and chi square were used to analyze the word(s) and type of term(s) used with a spouse or lover and considered most erotic or arousing for the three sexual behaviors and male and female genitalia (see Tables I and II, Hypothesis 1 and 2). *T* tests were used to determine mean differences between heterosexual and homosexual regarding sexual communication. These questions included talk during sexual relations, use of erotic words, and use of slang during sexual relations with a spouse or lover (see Table III, Hypothesis 3).

## RESULTS

Analysis revealed that what is considered erotic terminology for male and female and heterosexual and homosexual varied as much for sexual orientation as for gender. Responses for male and female and heterosexual and homosexual in percentages supports Hypothesis 1, (see Table I).

Heterosexual males are more likely than gay males, heterosexual females, or lesbians to consider the term "cunt" as erotic, although "pussy" is the preferred term followed by "vagina." Heterosexual females considered both "vagina" and "pussy" as equally erotic whereas lesbians used "clit" or "clitoris" as the most erotic term. The largest percentage of gay males reported "no term" as erotic or arousing for female genitalia.

Heterosexual females thought "penis" was the most erotic term for male genitalia followed by the term "dick." Heterosexual males used "dick" as their erotic term for male genitalia while gay males and lesbians used "cock."

"Make love" was cited as the most erotic term for lovemaking/coitus for heterosexual males, heterosexual females, and lesbians. Gay males used

**Table I.** Erotic Terminology by Gender and Sexual Orientation in Percentages<sup>a</sup>

Specific term	Gender and sexual orientation <sup>b</sup>			
	Heterosexual males	Gay males	Heterosexual females	Lesbians
<b>Female genitalia</b>				
Vagina	16.7	10.0	33.3	6.7
Clitoris (clit)	13.3	0.0	3.3	46.7
Pussy	30.0	26.7	33.3	30.0
Cunt	23.3	10.0	9.1	0.0
Other	16.7	10.0	16.7	13.3
None	0.0	43.3	10.0	3.3
$\chi^2(15) = 69.88, p \leq 0.0001$				
<b>Male genitalia</b>				
Penis	20.0	10.0	40.0	20.0
Dick	40.0	13.3	23.3	10.0
Cock	33.3	66.7	10.0	40.0
Other	6.7	10.0	20.0	10.0
None	0.0	0.0	6.7	20.0
$\chi^2(12) = 39.71, p \leq 0.0001$				
<b>Coitus</b>				
Make love	60.0	36.7	90.0	76.7
Fuck	26.7	53.3	3.3	20.0
Sex	0.0	6.7	3.3	0.0
Screw	6.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Other	6.7	3.3	3.3	3.3
$\chi^2(12) = 32.56, p \leq 0.00001$				
<b>Oral-genital contact</b>				
Fellatio/cunnilingus	3.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Oral sex	16.7	0.0	26.7	0.0
Head	16.7	13.3	3.3	0.0
Blow job	33.3	30.0	6.7	3.3
Suck	3.3	46.7	10.0	46.7
Eat	3.3	3.3	20.0	23.3
Other	23.3	6.7	30.0	23.3
None	0.0	0.0	3.3	3.3
$\chi^2(21) = 68.73, p \leq 0.00001$				
<b>Hand-genital contact</b>				
Masturbate	20.0	13.3	16.7	10.0
Hand job	23.3	6.7	10.0	23.3
Jack off/Jerk/ Beat off	10.0	70.0	0.0	6.7
Fondle/touch/pet	16.7	0.0	43.3	23.3
Stroke	0.0	6.7	10.0	23.3
Other	26.7	3.3	20.0	13.3
None	3.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
$\chi^2(18) = 80.50, p \leq 0.00001$				

<sup>a</sup>Percentage derived from terms considered erotic out of total terms used.

<sup>b</sup>N = 30 in each group.

**Table II.** Percentage of Terms Used Considered Erotic Out of Total Sexual Terms Used With a Spouse/Lover by Sexual Orientation and Gender<sup>a</sup>

Sexual orientation and gender	Female genitalia	Male genitalia	Coitus	Hand-genital contact	Oral-genital contact
Heterosexual males	40.0	36.7	60.0	40.0	40.0
Gay males	30.0 <sup>b</sup>	80.8	63.3	70.0	66.7
Heterosexual females	30.0	40.0	66.7	40.0	36.7
Lesbians	50.0	43.3 <sup>c</sup>	70.0	60.0	53.3
$\chi^2(3)$ total by column	7.33, $p \leq 0.06$	25.30, $p \leq 0.0001$	0.86, $p \leq 0.83$	12.86, $p \leq 0.005$	11.46, $p \leq 0.009$
Total $\chi^2(12)$		28.79, $p \leq 0.01$			

<sup>a</sup>Percentage derived from terms considered erotic by individuals out of total sexual terms used by individuals with a spouse/lover.  $N = 30$  in each group.

<sup>b</sup>Not applicable, 66.7%.

<sup>c</sup>Not applicable, 19.8%.

**Table III.** *T* Tests for Verbal Communication With a Spouse/Lover during Coitus/Lovemaking by Sexual Orientation and Gender<sup>a</sup>

Variable	$\bar{X}^b$	SD	SE	df	<i>t</i> value	<i>p</i>
Use erotic/arousing words						
Female						
Heterosexual	4.90	2.07	0.38	58	-1.58	<0.120
Lesbian	5.83	2.49	0.46			
Male						
Heterosexual	5.07	1.89	0.35	58	-2.13	<0.038
Gay	6.27	2.43	0.44			
Use slang						
Female						
Heterosexual	2.27	1.60	0.29	58	-2.21	<0.031
Lesbian	3.33	2.11	0.39			
Male						
Heterosexual	2.50	1.85	0.34	58	-3.28	<0.002
Gay	4.57	2.91	0.53			

<sup>a</sup>*N* = 30 in each group

<sup>b</sup>Mean scores based on a 10-point Likert scale.

“fuck” as their most erotic term for lovemaking/coitus followed by “make love.”

For oral-genital contact gay males and lesbians preferred “suck” as most erotic. Heterosexual females used “oral sex” as most erotic followed by “eat,” whereas heterosexual males reported “blow job” as most erotic. Generally, heterosexuals more than homosexuals considered a wider range of terms as erotic for oral-genital contact.

Gay males listed “jack off,” “jerk off,” or “beat off” as erotic or arousing terms for hand-genital contact, whereas lesbians considered “pet,” “touch,” or “stroke” as erotic or arousing terms. Heterosexual females said that “fondle,” “pet,” and “touch” were the most erotic or arousing. Heterosexual males more often considered “other terms” which are used as euphemisms or indirect expressions for hand-genital contact as erotic or arousing.

Hypothesis 2 was supported. Generally, homosexuals more than heterosexuals used sexual vocabulary with a partner that they agree is erotic or arousing. The only exception in the five categories—male genitalia, female genitalia, lovemaking/coitus, oral-genitalia contact, and hand-genital contact—is lovemaking/coitus (see Table II).

Though lesbians and gay males talked to their partner during sexual activity more often than heterosexual males and females, a significant difference was not found (*X* = 6.20, heterosexuals; *X* = 6.95, homosexuals, *t* =

1.84,  $p \leq 0.06$ , Hypothesis 3). Homosexuals generally, gay males particularly, more often than heterosexual respondents used erotic or arousing words during sexual interaction ( $X = 4.98$ , heterosexuals;  $X = 6.05$ , homosexuals,  $t = -2.63$ ,  $p \leq 0.01$ , see Table III, Hypothesis 3). "Gay males and lesbians will make greater use of slang vocabulary as erotic or arousing terminology in their sexual interaction than will heterosexuals" was supported for gay males ( $X = 2.38$ , heterosexuals;  $X = 3.95$ , homosexuals,  $t = -3.90$ ,  $p \leq 0.0001$ , see Table III, Hypothesis 3).

Generally, gay males and lesbians talked with their intimate partner about sexual activity more often than heterosexual females and males did according to the results of this study. Gay males and lesbians also made greater use of erotic or arousing sexual vocabulary and more often used slang words during sexual interaction.

## DISCUSSION

There is no universally standard erotic vocabulary for use with a spouse or lover based upon gender or sexual orientation. Rather, gender and sexual orientation are variables that significantly affect the perception of what is considered erotic vocabulary. Homosexuals are significantly more likely to agree on what is erotic and to use such vocabulary with a spouse or lover than are heterosexuals.

Heterosexuals more often than homosexuals use sexual language they do not consider erotic or arousing. Symons (1979) suggested that heterosexuals compromise their true sexual natures in the context of a sexual relationship and thus feel they cannot use what is most erotic or arousing with a partner, possibly because they fear rejection or because of discomfort with such vocabulary. Gay males and lesbians can sexually relate to a same-sex partner in a stereotypically pure form of male and female socialization according to Symons.

Heterosexual male and female appear to show more constraint and adherence to traditional gender roles when it comes to using erotic language with a spouse or lover than gay males and lesbians do with a spouse or lover. Masters and Johnson (1979) proposed that lesbian couples and gay male couples, when compared to heterosexual couples, talk with each other more often about what they want sexually. Although this study did not find a significant difference between homosexuals and heterosexuals in terms of talking with a partner about what they want sexually, results indicate that the differences between these two groups approached significance favoring greater sexual communication among homosexuals.

The greater use of arousing or erotic language with a spouse or lover by gay males and lesbians suggests that if indeed there are barriers to heterosexual erotic communication, heterosexuals may want to break free of stereotypical roles and learn from gay males and lesbians regarding the use of sexually arousing communication. Each partner might give to the other and to themselves what is erotic or arousing in the way of sexual language in order to enhance their sexual relationship.

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