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To cite this article: Ibtihaj S. Arafat & Wayne L. Cotton (1974) Masturbation practices of males and females, *Journal of Sex Research*, 10:4, 293-307, DOI: [10.1080/00224497409550863](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224497409550863)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224497409550863>



Published online: 11 Jan 2010.



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Masturbation Practices of Males and Females

IBTIHAJ S. ARAFAT AND WAYNE L. COTTON

Abstract

In this study, the authors have examined the masturbation practices of both male and female college students, attempting to test some of the premises long held that men and women differ significantly in such practices. The findings indicate that while there are differences in many of the variables examined, there are others which show striking similarities. Thus, they open to question a number of assumptions held regarding differences in sexual needs and responses of males and females.

Introduction

The theoretical framework for this study has its basis in the early studies of Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin (1948). These first studies sought to document factually and statistically masturbation practices in this country. Though innovative, these studies have become outdated and limited in light of contemporary developments. Increased openness in discussion of sexual practices generally, together with more sophisticated knowledge of human sexuality (Shearer, 1972), changes in mores, and a reevaluation of sex socialization have given new dimensions to ideas regarding masturbation.

It is, however, with regard to women that these changes show the most impact. Today sex practices of women are being discussed at all levels, although it appears from material in the field, that male patterns of masturbation are stressed much more in the available data. It is the purpose of this study to provide more information on the subject so as to produce a more current evaluation, by conducting a comparative analysis of men and women in regard to their habits of masturbation. The information, therefore, has been gathered from both males and females.

The authors feel that in the past ten years there have been changes in traditional attitudes about masturbation as in other areas of sexual behavior. The objective of the present study is to attempt to determine if an individual's gender is related to differences in patterns of

and attitudes toward masturbation, in regard to frequency, cause, effect, regularity, feelings, and awareness of the practice.

Review of the Literature

Masturbation is defined by the researchers as any sort of bodily self-stimulation that results in excitation of the genitals. It commonly involves handling or rubbing of the sexual organs, or bringing them into contact with some foreign object. Most writers use the term masturbation to mean the sexual stimulation that leads to climax or orgasm (Shearer, 1972:17). Cory makes the observation that “. . . it is necessary to bear in mind that almost all sexual activity is masturbatory. By that we mean that, except in the few instances where dreams and intense feelings result in ejaculation, no sex act can be consummated without some form of friction being applied to the sensitive part of the genitals, even though masturbation is usually thought of as being auto-erotic, or at least mutual, in the use of the hand or fingers of another as sources of frictional stimulation.” (Cory and Leroy, 1963:35). For purposes of this study, however, we are primarily interested in masturbation as a *solitary* activity, and include that in our definition. Masturbation as a mutual activity probably accounts for a very small part of the total activity.

According to Malfetti and Eidlitz (1973:33), “Authorities agree that masturbation does no physical harm, but some of them caution against carrying it to excess. The excess they speak of is psychological, for masturbation can become a substitute for other outlets to relieve tensions and anxieties that are not in the main sexually derived—for example, concern over one’s schoolwork, rejection by peers, and uncertainties about self-worth.”

In addition to the discharge of sexual tension, masturbation serves such purposes as the reduction of anxiety, expression of hostility, fantasizing of sexual experimentation, and an assertion of sexual identity in anticipation or recall.

Attitudes that are held concerning masturbation are of a mixed nature. In America, attitudes reflect the influence of two major sources: The Judeo-Christian tradition, and presently discarded medical opinion developed more or less in line with this tradition.

However, many religionists today, while not ready to accept mas-

turbation as moral, are more willing to excuse and tolerate it. Medical opinion for many years, and occasionally today, has been influenced by religious and moral traditions. It has been observed that mentally disturbed people often masturbate where they can be seen. Masturbation was thought to be the cause of their difficulties where in reality it was only a symptom.

The total effect of Western traditions was to make masturbation a highly censored and punishable behavior, one that could have such terrible results as insanity, death and possible damnation. Thus parents felt justified in going to extremes to save their children. Masturbation clinics were conducted under medical supervision, and aluminum mitts were sold to parents for incarcerating the children's hands at bedtime (Malfetti and Eidlitz, 1972). Other fears and fallacies related to masturbation are those of impotence and frigidity in that many people think these to be the result of excessive masturbation in the adolescent years (Bergler, 1958:10,243).

The cross-cultural evidence of the attitudes of people in other societies suggests that adults rarely engage in auto-genital stimulation, with some exceptions. For example, Marmor, (1965:118) observes, "Cubeo (Indians) adolescent experimentations are publicly displayed as sexual modalities for children and youth, and masturbation is conducted without shame. Similar prescriptive patterns are observable (in balance with proscriptive ones) in such cultures as those of the Ute, the Anadamanese, or the Tahitians, which we have used as examples of predominately permissive systems." It should be noted, however, that these references pertain mainly to young people and not to adults.

It is important to keep in mind that some social pressure is leveled toward masturbation among adults in nearly all societies, and for adolescents in many as well, certainly in Western cultures. Therefore, informants are more likely than not to underestimate the frequency or deny the behavior that is socially condemned. For most people, masturbation probably represents an inferior form of sexual activity in which adults should not participate. One of the exceptions are the Tesu of New Ureland, who expect the adult woman to engage in a form of masturbation when sexually excited and lacking a sex partner. Even among some of the people whose sex mores are very free, masturbation on the part of adults is considered undesirable. Tepcha men say they never masturbate because they regard semen as

a soiling substance. The Crow Indians interpret masturbation by an adult as a confession of inability to obtain a lover.

Masters and Edwardes (1962) describe masturbatory practices in the Middle East and the Orient, especially with regard to children and adolescents, but indicate a fairly high prevalence among adults as well in the traditional cultures. Again, it is quite probable that masturbation occurs among adults in more cultures than is generally admitted to or supposed.

It is not possible to state with complete accuracy the prevalence with which solitary masturbation is practiced. Data derived from the questioning of thousands of people by means of surveys in clinical settings such as the studies above by Kinsey et al. (1948, 1953) show that it is extremely common among both males and females of all ages. Kinsey reports that 92 percent of the men masturbate to the point of orgasm at least once during their lifetime (and this may be an understatement). However, self-stimulation is not limited to the masculine sex in American society.

Other researchers showed that 60 percent of the females masturbated at one time or another in their life. One quarter of these individuals practiced the habit at least once per week during the period when they were masturbating and 25 percent of the positive cases had indulged in genital stimulation regularly over a period of time. The majority of masturbators began self-stimulation early in life and ceased after adolescence, when heterosexual interests became predominant. However, research shows that one-third of the masturbating individuals ceased the behavior within one year of its inception, and one-half of them continued for ten to twenty years. Fear in terms of physical or mental deterioration was the reason most commonly given for discontinuing the practice, and women thought that self-manipulation engendered feelings of shame and disgust, while those women who were lacking in orgasmic response said they had outgrown the habit, or had no need for it.

Although masturbation is usually considered to be a phenomenon of adolescence, many boys and girls discover orgasm long before puberty. Prior to puberty the male like the female is capable of orgasm, though it is not accompanied by ejaculation. Self masturbation is responsible for the first ejaculation experienced by most American boys. This form of stimulation serves as the chief sexual outlet during the early years of adolescence. Studies in which female

adults have reported about their adolescent activity have given percentages clustering from about 30 to 60 percent, although some investigators have reported a much higher or lower figure (Kinsey, 1955). Kinsey reports that by late adolescence, about two-fifths of girls have had experience with masturbation, but only about half of these are actively pursuing the practice at any particular time. As for males, according to Kinsey (1948), the frequency of masturbation is progressively reduced in post-adolescent years, although it may continue through adult life. He found that 69 percent of American husbands who have graduated from college masturbate at least occasionally.

However, little is known about the frequency of masturbation among girls. All research findings indicate that it is less often, and is by no means a regular occurrence. The physical differences of boys and girls could be the main reason for the difference. With boys, the sexual urge awakens spontaneously together with the beginning of the function of the testicles, but the female's sexuality is less likely to be stimulated in early adolescence with the same urgency as that of males. Women are, on the whole, more conscious than men of the emotional aspects of sex and the significance of sexual activity, and do not content themselves so easily with substitutes. However, the female's behavior today is different from that of the past. Today's female's sexual behavior is the product of efficient contraceptives, new social equality in sex relations, and emotional honesty with self and others. All of this has its impact on her masturbatory practices and sexual behavior in general.

Masturbation has been discussed by a number of researchers (Ford and Frank, 1951; Himelhock and Fana, 1955; Marshall and Suggs, 1971; Bergler, 1954; Bernard, 1969; Brecher, 1969) but none of them has covered the points to the extent to which they are discussed in the present study.

Methods and Procedures

A self administered questionnaire was used in collecting data for this research. Six hundred students were chosen at random from three university campuses among all the campuses in the New York Metropolitan area. 435 respondents (72.5%) returned the completed questionnaires, while 165 questionnaires were either incomplete or

were not returned to the researchers. Of the 435 completed questionnaires, 52.87 percent (230 questionnaires) were completed by male respondents, and 47.13 percent (205 questionnaires) were completed by female respondents. The age of the respondents ranges between seventeen and thirty, with the majority in the age group of 20-22. The questionnaires consisted of twenty-seven questions. The first seven questions cover the demographic characteristics of the respondents such as sex, age, religious affiliation, marital status, ethnicity, and school classification. Questions 8-12 discussed attitude formation of the respondents such as: how did the respondent become aware of masturbation, age at which he became aware of it, age he began masturbating, awareness of parents' attitude on masturbation, and description of the parents' attitude. Questions 13-15 discussed whether during adolescence masturbation was discussed among the respondent's peers, whether peers' attitude affected respondents' attitude on masturbation, and how it affected the respondents' attitude. The following five questions (16-20) discussed the respondent's masturbatory practices, asking if he (she) now masturbates, and if he answered no, why not? If his answer was yes—how often, under what conditions he masturbates, and how he feels after masturbation: afraid, guilty, satisfied, depressed, or perverse. Questions 21, 22, and 23 inquired about the masturbatory practices of the respondent if he (she) has other sexual outlets on a regular basis, and if, whether these affect masturbatory practices, whether he discusses his masturbation with his partner, and whether the partner also masturbates. The last four questions (24-27) measured the degree of the anxiety respondents have in being discovered in the act of masturbation, where they masturbate, own masturbation frequency compared to the frequency of others, and whether the frequency of orgasm due to masturbation is equal, less than, or more than the frequency of orgasm during sexual activity with a partner.

Percentages were used in the tabulation of data to facilitate comparisons, in addition to the Chi-Square test, which is used to show whether a relationship exists between the dependent and independent variables in the study. The independent variable used was the sex of the respondent, and the dependent variables were the age he (she) started masturbating, intensity of orgasm during intercourse with a partner, frequency of masturbation, reasons for refraining from masturbation, how respondent became aware of masturbation, reasons

for masturbation, feelings after masturbation, effect of regular sexual activity on masturbation practices, fear of being discovered, and frequency of masturbation as conceived by respondent in comparison to others.

The data were collected over a period of four months—September 1972—February 1973, and the analysis was done during the year of 1973.

Analysis and Discussion

As previously stated, the main objective of this research is to try to determine if there is any relationship between gender and masturbatory practices, and if so, what the relationship is.

The sample used in this analysis was made up of 52.87 percent (230) males and 47.13 percent (205) females. Of both sexes, 75.86 percent (330) of respondents report that they presently masturbate, and 24.14 percent (105) that they do not. More males (89.13 percent) than females (60.98 percent) masturbate. These figures very nearly coincide with available data from Kinsey, *et al.*, cited above. Kinsey reported that 90 percent of the males and 60 percent of the females in the United States masturbated at least once in their lives. The difference in the present study lies in the fact that different questions were posed to find out if masturbation is engaged in *at present*, while Kinsey asked if respondents had *ever* masturbated. In addition, the respondents in the present study were limited to college students, while Kinsey's sample included respondents of more diverse backgrounds, although he did break his data down to show variations according to educational background. Also, a large number of the respondents here are still in the stage of late adolescence, and this is the time of sexual experimentation and high frequency of masturbation. Many of those who do masturbate for a limited period of their lives, do it during adolescence. Table 1 illustrates masturbation by sex of respondent.

As for the relationship between sex and the age one begins to masturbate, most people (males and females) begin masturbating between the ages of 9 and 16, but there is a higher percentage of females who begin masturbating between the ages of 17 and 21. The researchers believe that this difference comes from the variation of the primary effect of orgasm on the individual. According to theo-

TABLE 1
Masturbation by Sex of Respondent

Behavior	Males	52.87%	Females	47.13%	Total	%
Do masturbate	205	89.13	125	60.98	330	75.86
Do not masturbate	25	10.87	30	39.02	105	24.14
Total	230	100.00%	205	100.00%	435	100.00%

TABLE 2
Relationship between Sex and the Age at First Masturbation

Age at First Masturbation	Males	62.12%	Females	37.88%	Total	%
5-8 years	30	14.63	25	20.00	55	16.67
9-12 years	85	41.46	40	32.00	125	37.88
13-16 years	80	39.02	40	32.00	120	36.36
17-21 years	10	4.88	20	16.00	30	9.09
Total	205	100.00%	125	100.00%	330	100.00%

retical information, sexual stimulus in males is more closely related to the development of testicle function whereas the similar function for females is related to specific glandular development.

Table 3 shows the relationship between sex of respondent and the intensity of orgasm during masturbation versus the intensity of orgasm during intercourse with a partner. A substantially higher percentage of females (33.33%) than males (9.27%) experience a higher intensity of orgasm during masturbation than during activity with a partner. However, the majority of both sexes (51.22% of the males and 45.84% of the females), stated that the intensity of orgasm during masturbation is less than during intercourse.

Table 4 shows that no significant difference was found to exist between sex of respondent and frequency of masturbation. The data show that most people who do masturbate, regardless of sex, do it on the average of several times per week or several times per month.

As for the reasons for refraining from masturbation on the part of those who do not masturbate (105 respondents or 24.14%), a higher percentage of the females (76.25%) stated that they refrain from masturbation due to lack of desire, compared to 56.00% of the males

who do not masturbate because of the same reason. However, a higher percentage of the males (32.00%) than females (13.75%) who do not masturbate thought of masturbation as a waste of energy, immoral, and producing cheap feelings. The rest of the respondents (12.00% males and 10.00% females) who do not masturbate gave inhibitions, guilt feelings, and religion as reasons for refraining from masturbation.

Table 6 illustrates how the respondent first became aware of masturbation. The highest percentage of both sexes (58.70% males, and 49.76% females) stated that they first became aware of the

TABLE 3
Intensity of Orgasm During Masturbation vs. Intensity of Orgasm During Intercourse with a Partner

Intensity of Orgasm	Males	62.12%	Females	37.88%	Total	%
Masturbation equal intercourse	81	39.51	26	20.83	107	32.42
Masturbation less than intercourse	105	51.22	57	45.84	162	49.10
Masturbation greater than intercourse	19	9.27	42	33.33	61	18.48
Total	205	100.00%	125	100.00%	330	100.00%

TABLE 4
Frequency of Masturbation

Frequency	Males	62.12%	Females	37.88%	Total	%
Several times a day	21	10.00	14	11.11	35	10.61
Once daily	14	6.67	7	5.55	21	6.36
A few times a week	68	33.33	42	33.34	110	33.33
Once a week	34	16.67	14	11.11	48	14.55
A few times a month	68	33.33	48	38.89	116	34.15
Total	205	100.00%	125	100.00%	330	100.00%

process by self discovery. The second highest percentage (30.87% males and 29.27% females) became aware of the process through friends. This reflects the strength of the peer group relationship and its affect as a socialization agency. The lowest percentage (1.30% males and 1.46% females) learned by discussion with parents or by overhearing parents talking about it. Parents usually refrain from discussing such topics with their children. A similar percentage learned from siblings (2.61% males and 3.90% females). However, a higher percentage of females (15.61%) than males (6.25%) learned from strangers or by coincidence.

When the respondents were asked about the cause of masturbation, 47.45 percent males and 39.24 percent females stated that they felt horny, 21.17 percent males and 24.30 percent females gave pleasure seeking as a cause, 12.41 percent males and 16.36 percent females masturbated because they felt lonely, 11.31 percent males and 9.35 percent females stated that they were suffering from frustration and

TABLE 5
Reasons for Refraining from Masturbation

Reasons	Males	23.81%	Females	76.11%	Total	%
Inhibitions	1	4.00	3	3.75	4	3.81
Guilt	1	4.00	3	3.75	4	3.81
Religion	1	4.00	2	2.50	3	2.86
Lack of desire	14	56.00	61	76.25	75	71.43
Others (immoral, feel cheap, waste of energy)	8	32.00	11	13.75	19	18.09
Total	25	100.00%	80	100.00%	105	100.00%

TABLE 6
How Respondent First Became Aware of Masturbation

Awareness Process	Males	52.87%	Females	47.13%	Total	%
By self discovery	135	58.70	102	49.76	237	54.48
Through parents	3	1.30	3	1.46	6	1.38
Through friends	71	30.87	60	29.27	131	30.12
Through siblings	6	2.61	8	3.90	14	3.22
Others (strangers)	15	6.52	32	15.61	47	10.80
Total	230	100.00%	205	100.00%	435	100.00%

TABLE 7
Cause of Masturbation

Cause of Masturbation	Males	62.12%	Females	37.88%	Total	%
Loneliness	34	12.41	35	16.36	69	14.14
Feeling horny	130	47.45	84	39.25	214	43.85
Frustration and mental strain	31	11.31	20	9.35	51	10.45
Pleasure seeking	58	21.17	52	24.30	110	22.54
Others (absence of mate)	21	7.66	23	10.75	44	9.02
Total	274	100.00%	214	100.00%	488*	100.00%

* Some respondents cited more than one cause of masturbation.

TABLE 8
Feelings after Masturbation

Feelings After Masturbation	Males	62.12%	Females	37.88%	Total	%
Guilt	30	12.71	15	9.74	45	11.54
Physical satisfaction	161	68.22	88	57.14	249	63.85
Depression	26	11.02	38	24.68	64	16.41
Perversion	11	4.66	2	1.30	13	3.33
Fear of becoming insane	8	3.39	11	7.14	19	4.87
Total	236	100.00%	154	100.00%	390*	100.00%

* Some respondents cited more than one response.

mental strain, and only 7.66 percent males, and 9.02 percent females gave the absence of a mate as a reason.

Table 8 illustrates the feelings after masturbation by sex. There is a significant difference between the sexes. While the majority of both sexes (68.22% males and 57.4% females) stated that they have physical but no emotional satisfaction, 11.02% of the males compared to 24.08 percent of the females stated that they feel depressed after they masturbate. However, a higher percentage of males (12.71%) than females (9.74%) have feelings of guilt, 3.39% of the males and 7.14% of the females fear of becoming insane, and 4.66% of the males and 1.30% of the females feel perverse.

As for the effect of other sexual activities on the frequency of masturbation (Table 9), about half of both sexes (45.37 percent males and 48.80 percent females) stated that there is no need for masturbation if they have regular sexual activity with a partner. However, almost 20% of both sexes in the sample stated that sexual intercourse has no effect on the frequency of masturbation and almost 17% of both sexes stated that the frequency decreases but is still regular. A higher percentage of the males (16.59%) than females (9.60%) stated that they masturbate occasionally even though they have frequent sexual activity. On the other hand, a higher percentage of females (5.50%) than males (1.46%) stated that the frequency increases, which may reflect the lack of sexual satisfaction with the sex partner on the part of the female. In this case, masturbation is used as an aid in releasing tension.

Table 10 shows no significant difference between the sexes in regard to feeling afraid of being discovered in the act of masturbation. However, of both sexes, almost 40% stated that they fear being discovered in the act.

When the respondents were asked to compare their frequency of masturbation, as conceived by them, in comparison to others (Table 11), a higher percentage of males (69.27%) than females (55.20%) stated that it is equal to the others, while a higher percentage of

TABLE 9
Effect of Other Sexual Activity on Masturbation

Effect on Masturbation	Males	62.12%	Females	37.88%	Total	%
Cessation of masturbation	93	45.37	61	48.80	154	46.67
Frequency remains the same	39	19.02	25	20.00	64	19.39
Frequency increases	3	1.46	7	5.60	10	3.03
Frequency decreases but still regularly practiced	36	17.56	20	16.00	56	16.97
Occasional Masturbation	34	16.59	12	9.60	46	13.94
Total	205	100.00%	125	100.00%	330	100.00%

TABLE 10
Fear of Being Discovered in the Act of Masturbation

Response	Males	62.12%	Females	37.88%	Total	%
Yes	84	40.98	50	40.00	134	40.61
No	121	59.02	75	60.00	196	59.39
Total	205	100.00%	125	100.00%	330	100.00%

TABLE 11
Frequency of Masturbation as Conceived by Respondent in Comparison to Others

Frequency as Compared to Others	Males	62.12%	Females	37.88%	Total	%
More than others	18	8.78	3	2.40	21	6.36
Less than others	28	13.66	50	40.00	78	23.64
Equal to others	142	69.27	69	55.20	211	63.94
Do not know	17	8.29	3	2.40	20	6.06
Total	205	100.00%	125	100.00%	330	100.00%

females (40.00%) than males (13.66%) stated that it is less than others. On the other hand, a higher percentage of males (8.78%) than females (2.40%) thought that they have a higher frequency of masturbation than others, and the same percentages of both sexes stated that they do not know.

Conclusions

The percentages of both males and females who masturbate appear to approximate the figures given by Kinsey *et al.* There is new evidence presented herein, however, which indicates many differences between men and women in masturbatory practices, which to some extent modifies existing conceptions concerning female masturbation. There are also some significant similarities. For example, among both males and females who do masturbate, the frequency with which masturbation is practiced is very similar. The majority of both sexes begin masturbating between the ages of 9 and 16 years, although a somewhat greater number of women began the practice prior to age 9 and after age 16 than men.

However, many more females than males reported a greater intensity of orgasm resulting from masturbation than from intercourse, with nearly one-third so reporting, and many more females than males say that they do not masturbate simply from lack of desire. The immediate reasons for masturbating are similar in the two sexes except that somewhat more males than females attribute it to sexual tension (feeling horny). About twice as many females as males report feeling depressed after masturbation, which may reflect the belief that the practice is less desirable in women than in men, although feelings of guilt were slightly more frequent among the male respondents, and fear of being discovered in the act almost exactly the same. More females than males feel that their frequency of masturbation is less than that of others.

These and other findings suggest that although men and women show many more similarities in habits of masturbation than earlier data or popular beliefs indicate, there are still more interesting differences between the two sexes. Some of these differences may still reflect the traditional feelings about women's sexuality and the double standard associated with it.

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