

Research shows men and women look at sexual photographs differently

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A study funded by the Atlanta-based Center for Behavioral Neuroscience (CBN) analyzed the viewing patterns of men and women looking at sexual photographs, and the result was not what one typically might expect.

Researchers hypothesized women would look at faces and men at genitals, but, surprisingly, they found men are more likely than women to first look at a woman's face before other parts of the body, and women focused longer on photographs of men performing sexual acts with women than did the males. These types of results could play a key role in helping researchers to understand human sexual desires and its ultimate effect on public health.

The finding, reported in *Hormones and Behavior*, confirmed the hypothesis of a previous study (Stephen Hamann and Kim Wallen, et al., 2004) that reported men and women showed different patterns of brain activity when viewing sexual stimuli. The present study examined sex differences in attention by employing eye-tracking technology that pinpoints individual attention to different elements of each picture such as the face or body parts.

"Men looked at the female face much more than women, and both looked at the genitals comparably," said lead author Heather Rupp, Ph.D., a fellow at The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender and Reproduction at Indiana University, who conducted the study in partnership with Kim Wallen, Ph.D., a Dobbs Professor of Psychology

and Behavioral Neuroendocrinology at Emory University and the Yerkes National Primate Research Center.

"The eye-tracking data suggested what women paid most attention to was dependent upon their hormonal state. Women using hormonal contraceptives looked more at the genitals, while women who were not using hormonal contraceptives paid more attention to contextual elements of the photographs," Rupp said. Although it is commonly assumed males have more interest in visual sexual stimuli, researchers are working to figure out what characteristics are important to men and women in their evaluations of sexual stimuli.

The answer may lie within a small section of the brain called the amygdala, which is important in the processing of emotional information. In Dr. Hamann and Wallen's previous fMRI study, men showed more activation in the amygdala in response to sexual vs. neutral stimuli than did women. From the fMRI study alone, the cause of the increased activity was unclear, but Rupp and Wallen's study suggests the possibility that higher amygdala activation in men may be related to their increased attention to faces in sexual photographs.

Source: Emory University

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