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A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF NOCTURNAL EMISSIONS

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Abstract

The range of possible experiences that sexually mature males can have regarding nocturnal emissions has been neglected in the literature since Kinsey's findings were published in 1948. The present study, conducted by questionnaires, found that males generally have received little information about nocturnal emissions, resulting in negative feelings about them. This occurred despite the presence or absence of the experience. Contrary to expectations, this investigation found a higher percentage of males who had never had a nocturnal emission than was reported by Kinsey. Implications for the educational, medical, and counseling fields are noted.

Nocturnal emissions are one of the least understood topics of human sexual response (Thornberg, 1981). While this aspect of male sexuality is of wide interest to both men and women, the empirical literature is scant. Not since Kinsey's work in 1948 on male sexual behavior has an empirical investigation considered sexually mature males who have experienced a nocturnal emission.

In a study of males' sexual behavior, Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin (1948) found that males who experienced nocturnal emissions reported a peak occurrence when they were 19 to 20 years of age with college-educated males experiencing a greater frequency beginning at earlier ages than non-college males. Although greater information about sexuality is more characteristic of the college-educated than those without college experience, very few males are prepared for the ejaculation that may result from an erotic dream. They are even less prepared for an absence of ejaculation, even though dreaming results in the sensations of orgasm.

Practically all sexually mature males dream to orgasm, but not all males who have such dreams and experience orgasm will have an accompanying ejaculate (Kinsey *et al.*, 1948). Orgasm and ejaculation are sep-

arate responses, though for the majority of males they most often occur simultaneously. The assumption has been that males will find nocturnal emissions a highly pleasurable sensation and, therefore, that no explanation about them is needed. However, the experience in actuality may often be quite traumatic, steeped in fright and misunderstanding (Shipman, 1968).

This lack of information led to the formulation of the present study which was designed to compare college males' varying experiences and reactions to nocturnal emissions. Specifically, this investigation considered respondents' sexuality education and preparation for nocturnal emissions, living status (e.g., married, cohabitating, single), religiosity, dream-relatedness and frequency of other sexual behaviors as an effect on nocturnal emissions.

Sample and Data Collection

A systematic, random sample was selected by the authors. Respondents were 104 college males attend-

Figure 1
A Randomly Selected Representative Sample of Questions on Sexuality and Nocturnal Emissions

True/False Questionnaire

1. Adolescent males should experience wet dreams.
 8. Pregnancy can occur during menstruation.
 12. There is more variation in the size of the penis in the flaccid (non-erect) state than in the erect state.
 15. Studies confirm that most accurate sex information has come from formal classroom instruction rather than from peers, parents or clergy.
 18. Some males have erotic dreams to orgasm but do not experience ejaculation.
-

ing an intermountain state university. Their mean age was 23.6 years (range 18 to 41 years). Over the course of a seven-day period, every fifth male student entering the library and student union was asked to complete a questionnaire on nocturnal emissions. More than 80% of the approached persons completed a true/false pretest on human sexuality and the Inventory of Nocturnal Emissions. This inventory, designed by the researchers specifically to measure the experiences and reactions of males having had or not had nocturnal emissions, contained selected items about nocturnal emissions that were based upon the range of male experiences reported by Kinsey and his associates (1948). The variables identified in Kinsey's study were modified and used to construct questions which assessed respondents' demographic characteristics, personal experiences concerning nocturnal emissions, dream frequency at specific ages, present reactions to nocturnal emissions, and the effects of other sexual outlets on the frequency of nocturnal emissions. The true/false pretest constructed by the authors and administered prior to the Inventory of Nocturnal Emissions was designed to measure respondents' general level of sex education and information about nocturnal emissions.

Sample Characteristics

Of the 104 males who filled out questionnaires, 29 men (Group 1) reported that they had never experienced a nocturnal emission and 75 men (Group 2) stated that they had experienced one or more nocturnal emissions. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 41 years of age. Most (74) of these men were undergraduate students. However, 30 respondents reported graduate work or degrees. Participants were primarily single (64%), with 20% married, 7% heterosexually cohabitating, 6% homosexually cohabitating, and 3% divorced. The respondents came from various religious backgrounds with Mormons comprising the majority (27%) of those who cited a denomination. However, the highest percentile (29%) was not from this group but from those males that reported no religious affiliation at all.

Variables and Data Analysis

In the Inventory of Nocturnal Emissions, an independent sample "t" technique was used to determine the mean differences between males who reported that they had experienced nocturnal emissions and males who reported that they had never experienced a nocturnal emission for the following variables: 1) reactions to their respective experiences; 2) the effect of other sexual outlets on the frequency of nocturnal emissions; 3) sources of preparatory information for the range of experiences males can have regarding nocturnal emissions; 4) general sex information assessed from scores attained on the sexuality pretest; and, 5) current information about nocturnal emissions assessed from scores attained on four items that were included in the general sexuality pretest.

The chi-square nonparametric technique was used to determine whether the following variables had a significant effect upon nocturnal emissions: 1) the effect of other sexual outlets upon dream frequency and the range of male experiences concerning nocturnal emissions; 2) the effect of demographic characteristics upon the reported frequency of nocturnal emissions and/or orgasm; and, 3) sources of information and reported reactions of males to the range of experiences concerning nocturnal emissions.

Results and Discussion

Nocturnal emissions are primarily seen as a phenomenon experienced by single males in their teens and early twenties. Yet, results show that males and females are not aware of the differing responses that can occur in males regarding nocturnal emissions. It was recognized first by Kinsey *et al.* (1948), and others since, that practically all men experience nocturnal emissions. However, the Kinsey studies found that 17% of the males interviewed never experienced nocturnal dreaming to orgasm with an ejaculate by age 47. Of the 104 males in this study, 29 respondents or almost 28% of this sample had not experienced wet dreams, *exceeding* the 1948 report by Kinsey for this age. Educational level within the sample did not appear to be operating here, though a comparative, non-college population was not used. However, 40% of the respondents believed that the frequency of nocturnal emissions could be determined by various situations from other sexual behavior to religious beliefs, which they partially or wholly could control.

Control was used not only in trying to bring about nocturnal orgasms but also preventing them. Thirty males, eight of whom had not had a "wet dream," tried, at some point in their lives, to bring about sexual dreams and the sensations of orgasm by refraining from masturbation for a time or by viewing/reading erotic materials, though little change was reported. Conversely, males who considered themselves very religious more often experienced nocturnal emissions as losing control, sinful, against my religious beliefs, as compared to males who defined themselves as moderately to not-at-all religious ($p < .05$). A significant factor was the ejaculate. Highly religious males who had never experienced a "wet dream" felt significantly less sinful than highly religious males who produced an ejaculate ($p < .05$). This was true for younger males, 18 to 21, who more frequently said they were very religious than did males over 21 years of age.

Age may also have been a factor in the number of nocturnal orgasms, which did not change significantly, regardless of whether respondents were sexually inactive, sexually active, or pair-bonded. Two-thirds of this sample were 25 years-old or younger and approximately a third of the respondents were married (20%), heterosexually cohabitating (7%), or homosexually cohabitating (6%).

Contrary to the investigators' expectations, the majority of males in this sample did not display a

Figure 2
The Nocturnal Emissions Inventory

1. What is your age? (Circle only one response)

18–19 1	24–25 4	30–31 7
20–21 2	26–27 5	32–33 8
22–23 3	28–29 6	Other (specify) 9

2. What is the highest level of schooling completed by you? (Circle only one response)

<u>High School</u>			<u>College or Trade School</u>				<u>Graduate School</u>			
10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20

3. What is your current living status? (Circle only one response)

Single	1
Married	2
Divorced	3
Divorced and remarried	4
Opposite sex cohabitation	5
Homosexual cohabitation	6

4. What is your religion? (Circle only one response)

Catholic	1
Jewish	2
Protestant	3
Mormon	4
Other (specify) _____	5
No Religious Affiliation	6

5. Would you say you are very religious, somewhat religious, slightly religious, or not at all religious? (Circle only one)

Very religious	1
Somewhat religious	2
Slightly religious	3
Not at all religious	4

6. Do you think of yourself as: (Circle only one response)

Predominantly heterosexual	1
Equally heterosexual and homosexual	2
Predominantly homosexual	3

7. Have you ever experienced a wet dream to orgasm with an ejaculate?

No	1
Yes	2

8. From what sources did you receive your information about wet dreams? (Under each source select the number that best corresponds with the amount of information received.)

Source	No Infor- mation	Little Information	Some Infor- mation	A Great Deal of Information
A. Parents	1	2	3	4
B. Siblings	1	2	3	4
C. Peers	1	2	3	4
D. Media	1	2	3	4
E. School				
Classroom	1	2	3	4
F. Religious				
Training	1	2	3	4
G. Books/Printed				
Material	1	2	3	4

9. From what sources did you learn that 15% to 20% of all males never experience wet dreams? (Under each source select the number that best corresponds with the amount of information received)

Source	No Infor- mation	Little Information	Some Infor- mation	A Great Deal of Information
A. Parents	1	2	3	4
B. Siblings	1	2	3	4
C. Peers	1	2	3	4
D. Media	1	2	3	4
E. School Classroom	1	2	3	4
F. Religious Training	1	2	3	4
G. Books/Printed Material	1	2	3	4

10. How frequently did you or do you dream to orgasm with or without an ejaculate? (Under each age select the number that best corresponds.)

Age in Years	N/A	Never	Once or Twice a Year	Less than Once a Month	Once or Twice a Month	Once or Twice a Week	Daily or More Often
18-19	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
20-21	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
22-23	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
24-25	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
26-27	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
28-29	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
30-31	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Other (Specify)		1	2	3	4	5	6

11. What is your *present* reaction to orgasm with or without an ejaculate? (Under each reaction select the number that describes you.)

Reaction	Not At All	Very Little	Some- what	Very Much So
A. Something I accept but feel is "abnormal"	1	2	3	4
B. Has made it more difficult to accept my sexual ability as a male	1	2	3	4
C. Something I enjoy and look forward to	1	2	3	4
D. Something I try to avoid at all costs	1	2	3	4
E. Something I dislike but live with	1	2	3	4
F. Something I readily accept as a normal circumstance	1	2	3	4

12. What effect do other sexual outlets such as masturbation, sexual intercourse, or couple sex play have on the frequency with which you have orgasm with or without an ejaculate? (Under each effect select the number that best corresponds.)

Effect	Not At All	Very Little	Some- what	Very Much So
A. Reduces the frequency	1	2	3	4
B. No change in the frequency	1	2	3	4
C. Increases with frequency	1	2	3	4
D. Varies with the situation	1	2	3	4

13. Which of the following reactions most closely describes your feelings about your *first* wet dream? (Under each reaction select the number that best describes you.)

Reaction	Not At All	Very Little	Some-what	Very Much So
A. Traumatic, psychologically painful	1	2	3	4
B. Confused, did not know what had happened	1	2	3	4
C. Afraid, something is wrong with my body	1	2	3	4
D. Sinful, against my religious belief	1	2	3	4
E. Guilty, should have had more self control	1	2	3	4
F. Awkward, did not want to tell my family	1	2	3	4
G. Satisfied, it was a release from sexual tension	1	2	3	4
H. Normal, reassurance as a male	1	2	3	4
I. Sign of maturity, was sexually capable	1	2	3	4
J. Don't recall	1	2	3	4
14. Behaviorally, what have you done to bring about a wet dream? (Circle any that apply).				
Nothing				1
Read erotica or sexual material				2
Wearing erotic clothing to bed				3
Stopped masturbation for a time				4
Other (specify) _____				5
15. Please briefly summarize any information about your experiences with nocturnal emissions that would add to this investigation.				
ADDITIONAL INFORMATION HERE:				

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP

range of frequency levels for nocturnal emissions. Instead, they clustered into two groups: those reporting one or two nocturnal emissions per year to less than one nocturnal emission per month, and those who had not experienced an orgasm-ejaculate. This is contradictory to the Kinsey *et al.* (1948) findings in which nocturnal emission frequency rates were found to occur, on the average, once every two weeks in the college population.

A common assumption is that more frequent sexual outlets for seminal discharge would reduce nocturnal emissions. This was found for some males, but for others nocturnal emission rates either did not change or increased. Some respondents stated that other sexual outlets served as a stimulus for sexual dreams which could result in nocturnal emissions, though most males did not feel sexual dreams to orgasm with or without an ejaculate changed as a result of greater or less sexual outlets either through masturbation or partner contact.

The respondents generally had a low percentage score on correct information about sex, with a mean score of 12.72 out of a possible 20 on the sexuality pretest (64%). Contrary to public opinion, males are not informed and educated about sexuality and nocturnal emissions. This confirms Shipman's (1968) conclusion that adolescent males are not receiving information on nocturnal emissions and sexuality. What information Shipman's sample received was from books/printed materials, while this sample received most of their information from books/printed materials and peers. In no case were respondents receiving

a great deal of information, but rather were reporting little to some information from books/printed materials and peers and no to little information from media, school classrooms, parents, and siblings.

Males who do not experience nocturnal emissions are receiving less information about nocturnal emissions than males who do experience them. Thus, males who have nocturnal emissions may question their occurrence, while males who don't experience them do not ask about what hasn't occurred. The likelihood that individuals would not be aware of nocturnal emissions is a possibility, but seemingly not a common one for the tell-tale evidence would be present in the morning. However, both groups' low scores on the true/false pretest and the four selected items from the pretest on nocturnal emissions correspond with their reported lack of information and education on sexuality and nocturnal emissions on the Inventory of Nocturnal Emissions. It was expected that the males who had not experienced nocturnal emissions would react to nocturnal emissions more negatively than those males who had experienced them. Yet, those males who had experienced them reacted more negatively on feelings of sinfulness ($p < .05$) and trauma ($p < .01$) at the onset of nocturnal emissions. These findings show that males who had not experienced nocturnal emissions felt significantly more "normal" than did males who had experienced them. Those who had experienced nocturnal emissions not only received little to no information regarding them, but also felt more "abnormal" ($p < .01$), had difficulty accepting their sexual abilities ($p < .001$), and lived

with nocturnal emissions but disliked it ($p = <.05$). This type of reaction could be a concern over the ejaculate which was described by some as "messy" or "embarrassing," as well as the lack of information and education and the fundamentalist religious beliefs of the denominations represented. Apparently, the lack of nocturnal emissions relieves males from negative feelings of sinfulness, pain, or acceptance of occurrence.

While the results reported here must be treated as tentative because of the exploratory nature of the study and because the respondents are not from a nationally diverse population, they do suggest that males, regardless of whether they have or have not experienced nocturnal emissions, are not receiving information and education about sexuality and nocturnal emissions. In addition, males who have experienced nocturnal emissions appear to be more negatively affected by their presence, particularly of the ejacu-

late, than males who have never experienced nocturnal emissions are by the lack of them. However, more research is needed to validate further these findings and to fully explore factors that may influence a male's attitudes regarding nocturnal emissions and sexuality. Certainly, the need to disseminate information regarding sexuality and nocturnal emissions to males is evident. Such information would also prove useful to those in counseling, medical, and educational settings.

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