

Vaginal *versus* clitoral? Or, vaginal *and* clitoral? A reply to Brody and Costa

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This brief article is a reply to Brody and Costa's (2017) commentary on the article "A critical examination of the relationship between vaginal orgasm consistency and measures of psychological and sexual functioning and sexual concordance in women with sexual dysfunction" (Therrien & Brotto, 2016). Although I could provide a counter-point to each of the criticisms of our article, I have chosen instead to use this space to remind readers that our understanding of the underlying anatomy of women's orgasms is nascent. In addition, a variety of types of stimulation contribute to whether, how, and how intensely a woman may reach orgasm. Findings on the nature of female orgasm don't "prove" or "disprove" other findings. Rather they need to be analyzed in the context of the range of contributory variables.

KEY WORDS: Orgasm, clitoral, vaginal, anatomy

I would like to thank Brody and Costa (2017) for writing a Commentary on our article "A critical examination of the relationship between vaginal orgasm consistency and measures of psychological and sexual functioning and sexual concordance in women with sexual dysfunction" (Therrien & Brotto, 2016). As the intellectual thinker and philosopher, Noam Chomsky (1998), reminds us: "The smart way to keep people passive and obedient is to strictly limit the spectrum of acceptable opinion, but allow very lively debate within that spectrum" (p. 43). Few other topics in the field of sex research and sexology have evoked such a firestorm of debate as the nature and expression of women's orgasms. Interestingly, and as noted by Pfaus, Quintana, Mac Cionnaith, and Parada (2016), the debate surrounding women's orgasms is polarized by Brody arguing in favour of the superiority of the vaginal orgasm at one end, and Puppo and Gruenwald (2012), arguing in favour of the clitoris at the other end. As Brody himself seems to recognize, this argument is as much political as it is scientific.

Brody and Costa (2017) criticize our article noting that

by attempting to dismiss the many studies finding beneficial associations of PVI orgasm, vaginal orgasm, and PVI (versus other sexual behaviours and orgasm triggers), Therrien and Brotto (2016) do what so many other contemporary sex writers do: prioritize political correctness over women's health and relationship quality (p. 3).

The authors list several criticisms of our study, including the fact that we recruited a sample with sexual dysfunction, that the data used in the study were cross-sectional, and that

in our assessment of vaginal orgasm, we did not carefully exclude the possibility of simultaneous clitoral stimulation. I could address each of Brody and Costa's (2017) listed criticisms with a counter-point (such as the position that including a sample of women with sexual problems limits the generalizability of our findings yet Brody's studies are similarly limited in their generalizability by exclusively focusing on women without sexual difficulties); however, I choose not to do so.

Instead, I wish to remind the reader that our understanding of the underlying anatomy of women's orgasms is nascent, and that we cannot conclude, as Brody and Costa (2017) do, that "when a woman's orgasm is induced purely by PVI, it is a vaginal orgasm" (p. 2). Imaging research with MRI indicates that the anatomic location of the Grafenberg spot (G spot) overlaps with the inner legs, bulbs, and corpora of the clitoris (O'Connell, Eizenberg, Rahman, & Cleeve, 2008). The same overlap between the internal wings of the clitoris with the anterior vagina was also confirmed using 3D sonography (Foldes & Buisson, 2009). Imaging of a couple during sexual intercourse further verified that penile thrusting not only stimulated the anterior vagina, but also the root of the clitoris (Buisson, Foldes, Jannini, & Mimoun, 2010). In sum, Brody's vaginal orgasm may not be vaginal at all, but a combination of vaginal and clitoral (and likely cervical too).

But we also know that anatomic stimulation is only one piece of the orgasmic pie. Pfaus et al. (2016) remind us that other types of stimulation provided by a partner (e.g., the smells, sounds, other touches, etc.) also contribute to whether, how, and how intensely a woman may reach orgasm. Whether

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a partner is novel or familiar can also impact orgasm. Finally, memories of sexual encounters from the past, and a woman's history of orgasms will also predict the nature of her orgasms in the here and now.

Rather than dismiss our findings as “politically motivated” (p. 3) or a “rallying cry to have others publish articles dismissive of the value of vaginal orgasm” (p. 3), Brody would do better to view our findings, as well as his own, as data points in a future large scale meta-analysis designed to address this topic. To that end, findings don't “prove” or “disprove” other findings; rather, they need to be analyzed in a much wider context that includes the richness of these other contributory variables.

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