

Project title: Sex as Interaction: An Interpersonal Approach to Sexual Arousal

Project leader: Marieke Dewitte

Function: Assistant Professor

Collaborators:

Proposal (250 words):

Introduction:

This project aims at broadening and innovating sex research by shifting the focus from individual towards dyadic theories and measurement procedures that include the responses of both sexual partners. It offers a fundamentally new perspective on the study of sexual concordance (i.e., agreement between subjective and genital sexual arousal), which is a key concept in basic models on sexual behaviour and sexual problems. Considering that sex most often takes place in a systemic interaction, we propose that the level of concordance between subjective and genital arousal depends on input of the partner and the relationship context, especially in women. We also propose that partners coregulate their sexual responses towards each other to establish a homeostatic level of sexual arousal in their relationship and this process is stagnated in case of sexual problems.

Hypothesis and Objectives:

- (1) Does *intrapersonal* sexual concordance vary as a function of partner presence and gender?
- (2) What pattern of temporal (co)variation can be detected in the sexual arousal responses of both partners and what are the underlying mechanisms that moderate intra- and interpersonal sexual concordance?
- (3) What is the hormonal basis of coregulation (i.e., oxytocine, dopamine)?
- (4) How do intra- and interpersonal sexual concordance operate in the context of sexual distress?

Setting and Methods: We will combine dyadic research with laboratory, experience sampling, and prospective designs in both 'healthy' and clinical samples, using biopsychosocial measures.

Impact: This interpersonal perspective contributes to the promotion of sexual health and well-being because it yields more ecologically valid conclusions that more accurately reflect sexual arousal in the daily context of the relationship.

Requirements candidate: Highly motivated student with good English communication skills and proactive and resolute attitude.

Keywords: Sexual arousal, interpersonal dynamics, relationships, intimacy, attachment, coregulation, psychophysiological measures, hormones

Top 5 selected publications:

1. Dewitte, M., Borg, C., Lowenstein, L. (in press). A psychosocial approach to female genital pain. *Nature Reviews Urology*
2. Dewitte, M., Van Lankveld, J., Vandenberghe, S., & Loeys, T. (2015). Sex in its daily relational context. *Journal of Sexual Medicine, 12*, 2436-2450.
3. Dewitte, M. (2012). Different perspectives on the sex-attachment link: Towards an emotion regulation account. *Annual Review of Sex Research, 49*, 105-124.
4. Dewitte, M., Van Lankveld, J., & Crombez, G. (2011). Understanding women suffering from sexual pain: A cognitive-motivational account. *Pain, 152*, 251-253.
5. Dewitte, M., De Houwer, J., Goubert, L., & Buysse, A. (2010). A multi-modal approach to the study of attachment-related distress. *Biological Psychology, 85*, 149-162.