

**In Search of Desire:**

**The role of Intimacy, Celebrated Otherness, and Object of Desire Affirmation in Sexual  
Desire in Women**

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*While the interactive nature of sexual desire in women is increasingly recognized, dyadic factors affecting it, including partner interactions, have as yet received little research attention. In this cross-sectional study, we examined the associations among intimacy, celebrated otherness, and object of desire affirmation and explored how they complement each other in the prediction of sexual desire in women. Based on the reports of 662 participants, positive correlations were found among all factors. However, in a multiple regression analysis, object of desire affirmation emerged as the only positive predictor of sexual desire.*

Diminished sexual desire is the most common reason for women to seek sexual counseling (Meana, 2010). Yet, our understanding of this aspect of female sexual functioning is limited and continues to be a challenge and goal in both clinical and basic areas of sex research. Sexual desire has traditionally been approached as an intra-individual construct. However, during the last few decades, evidence has accumulated suggesting that sexual desire is mostly responsive in nature. Contextual and dyadic factors are increasingly acknowledged in theoretical (e.g.,

Basson, 2000; Kingsberg, Clayton, & Pfaus, 2015; Singer & Toates, 1987), diagnostic (e.g., APA, 2013) and clinical approaches (e.g., Girard & Woolley, 2017; Zilbergeld & Ellison, 1980). Despite this emphasis on its dyadic nature, empirical research until recently has mostly focused on personality characteristics and the (psycho)physiological aspects of sexual desire. Dyadic factors, including partner interactions, have received relatively little attention from sex researchers so far. The current study focuses on the context of sexual desire in terms of interactions between partners and examines, more specifically, the roles of Intimacy, Celebrated Otherness, and Object of Desire Affirmation.

### Intimacy

In clinical and scientific discussions on the role of partner interactions in the emergence of sexual desire in women, intimacy is often referred to, implicitly or explicitly, as an essential ingredient. In previous studies, intimacy has been conceptualized as ‘depth of involvement’ (Miller & Lefcourt, 1983) and “a perception of closeness to another that is conducive to the sharing of personal feelings, accompanied by expectations of understanding, affirmation, and demonstrations of caring” (Sinclair & Dowdy, 2005, p. 194). Intimacy plays a central role in Basson’s (2000) circular model of female sexual response, where it serves as both an incentive and a reinforcer in the process of activation and regulation of sexual desire. Intimacy’s role in women’s sexual response has also been emphasized by Hall (2010), who argues that while men tend to approach sex as a way to experience intimacy, women consider desire and sex a result of emotional connection. The relevance of the link between intimacy and sexual desire in women is further supported by research on the plasticity of sexual orientation of women, where emotional closeness has been found to be a strong predictor of sexual desire (e.g., Diamond, 2004). Also, while several authors have reported a positive association between emotional

closeness and sexual desire in women (Birnbaum, Cohen, & Wertheimer, 2007; van Lankveld, Jacobs, Thewissen, Dewitte, & Verboon, 2018), others have suggested that (excessive) closeness may also be detrimental to sexual desire. For example, Levin (2003) has argued that familiarity attenuates desire, and Perel (2006) has suggested that intimacy in the form of fusion between partners kills desire. Sims and Meana (2010) provided empirical support for Levin's (2003) and Perel's (2006) claims regarding the potentially detrimental effects of (excessive) closeness. Based on their research on desire in the context of long-term relationships, Sims and Meana (2010) identified institutionalization of the relationship, overfamiliarity, and de-sexualized roles as major themes in women's causal attributions for the decline of their sexual desire.

### Celebrated Otherness

In formulating recommendations for clinicians to address sexual desire problems within long-term relationships, Sims and Meana (2010) encourage the introduction of "a healthy distance and individuation" (p. 377) and suggest that distance can facilitate sexual desire. Sims and Meana (2010) are not the only scholars to discuss the potential benefits of distance on the experience of sexual desire. The link between separateness and the construct of desire is evident in theoretical views that describe desire as a wish for something one does not have (Hall, 2010), or for something that is currently unattainable (Berscheid & Regan, 1999). In this line of thinking, separateness is beneficial to sexual desire; desire can be sharpened by withdrawal or abstinence (Singer & Toates, 1987) and be stimulated by fantasy, hope, and promise (Levine, 2003). Related prerequisites for desire are identified by Perel (2006). In her view, desire thrives in 'otherness', defined as the space between the self and the other that allows for the unknown, novel and unexpected, for surprise and risk. Consistent with this, it has been found that physical distance, openness to novelty, and curiosity are linked to sexual desire (Ferreira, Narciso, Novo,

& Pereira, 2014). The same variables have also been linked to the concept of differentiation, defined as the capacity to maintain a sense of personal autonomy in a close relationship, which itself has been found to be positively associated with sexual desire (Ferreira, Fraenkel, Narciso, & Novo, 2015; Ferreira et al., 2014).

In order to capture and explore the correlates of sexual desire described above in the context of a relationship (as opposed to otherness as experienced, for example, in the context of unattained or unrequited love), we introduce the term ‘celebrated otherness’. We use this term to refer to couple interactions where otherness between partners is explicitly maintained; not only recognized and accepted but also positively valued, cultivated, and built upon. We conceptualize celebrated otherness as relationship experiences that emphasize, at the same time, partners’ autonomy and investment in each other. As such, celebrated otherness is an antithesis to fusion, but not to intimacy.

#### Object of Desire Affirmation

While women may be attributed a relational orientation to sexuality (DeLamater, 1987), empirical studies have revealed that women often adopt an erotic self-focus, instead of a relational one, during sexual activities with a partner (for an overview: see Meana, 2010). This has led to the suggestion that female desire may be partly narcissistic in nature and that affirmation as an object of desire may be an important pathway to it for women (Meana, 2010). Thus, we use the term ‘object of desire affirmation’ (ODA) here to refer to evaluations of one’s desirability or sexual value and to the consecutive active affirmation of this sexual worth, including but not limited to the priority given to the fulfillment of one’s own sexual needs. We see ODA as potentially obtained through oneself as well as through one’s partner. Theory and research indeed point, as discussed below, to the value of both sources of affirmation when it comes to women’s sexual desire.

The awareness and appraisal of one's own attractiveness or beauty forms the basis of the recently developed theory of 'object of desire self-consciousness' (Bogaert & Brotto, 2014), which presents 'the perception that one is romantically and sexually desirable in another's eyes' as a core facet of female socio-sexual functioning. Themes related to self-evaluations and -affirmations of sexual worth are also discussed by Perel (2006), who proposes that a 'healthy sense of entitlement' and even a degree of selfishness are required in the pursuit of pleasure. Empirical research supports the theoretical claims about the importance of self-evaluations. A positive evaluation of one's own attractiveness and a positive body image have been associated with enhanced sexual desire in women (Raja, Khouri, & Meston, 2011). Also, Koch, Mansfield, Thureau, and Carey (2005) found that women who evaluated themselves as less attractive than 10 years before, experienced less sexual desire, irrespective of their age.

In addition to self-evaluations, external affirmations of one's desirability tend to be associated with sexual desire in women. To be desired by another person is considered the key to female sexual desire by Meana (2010), and Perel (2006) considers seduction by a partner a prerequisite for the development of desire. The requirement of another person in the awareness of one's own attractiveness is also acknowledged by the theory of 'object of desire self-consciousness', where it is linked to the belief that "one has achieved a level of attractiveness in the eyes of others to be worthy of romantic/sexual relations" (Bogaert & Brotto, 2014, p. 3). Support for the importance of external affirmations of desirability can be found, among others, in studies on sexual fantasies in women. Themes commonly observed in women's fantasies (e.g., having sex with a stranger, exposure themes, and receiving rather than giving pleasure; Gur-Arie, Tal, & Alfonso, 2006; Meana, 2010; Wilson, 1997; Zurbriggen & Yost, 2004), although not always associated with the wish to experience them in real life (Critelli & Bivona, 2008), can be interpreted as 'object of desire' themes, which center around the confirmation of women's sexual value and attractiveness. Furthermore, McCall and Meston (2006) found that

being told by a partner that he fantasized about them was a trigger for sexual desire for heterosexual women. Also, in a qualitative study by Brotto, Heiman, and Tolman (2009), women reported “having more desire if they felt desired by their partners” (p. 393).

The acknowledgement of the importance of another person in the affirmation of one’s sexual attractiveness and desirability distinguishes object of desire affirmation from related theoretical constructs such as sexual self-esteem (e.g., Zeanah & Schwarz, 1996) and sexual self-schemas (e.g., Andersen & Cyranowski, 1994). In the definition of attractiveness as domain of sexual self-esteem, the perceptions and evaluations of others are typically excluded (Zeanah & Schwarz, 1996). The construct of sexual self-schema does include interpersonal sexual experiences; however, only past experiences are considered and their influence seems to be interpreted as static. In our definition of object of desire affirmation, others are an important source of affirmation, and especially the sexual experiences with the current partner are considered important, making object of desire affirmation a dynamic, relationship-specific process.

#### The current study

The associations among the dyadic factors discussed above have often been portrayed as complex, for example in the writings of Perel and Meana. Perel (2006) describes the conflict between intimacy and otherness in terms of two different sets of needs, i.e., the need for togetherness, closeness, and safety on the one hand, and the need for autonomy, excitement, and mystery on the other. Meana (2010) reflects on the conflict between intimacy and an erotic self-focus by making a distinction between what women value and what turns them on, and she suggests that those may not always be in synchrony. However, alternative views have also been formulated. For example, Ferreira, Narciso, and Novo (2012) stated that “a certain distance is a precondition for a level of intimacy that allows for the survival of sexual desire” (p. 265),

implying that distance and closeness may complement rather than reduce or eliminate each other. Ferreira et al. (2012) studied distance by assessing each partner's 'differentiation of self', a construct reflecting individual patterns of relating to others in close relationships. However, differentiation of self is less informative of the unique dynamics of a specific relationship and does not assess how differentiation and distance are perceived and valued in the interaction with a partner.

Based on these observations and considerations, the aim of this study was to empirically explore the associations among intimacy, celebrated otherness, and ODA as experienced by women in interaction with a specific partner, as well as their relevance to desire for this particular partner. We hypothesized that celebrated otherness and ODA are positively associated with sexual desire in women. We approached the effect of intimacy on sexual desire on a more exploratory basis, as both positive and negative effects have been predicted (e.g., Basson, 2000; Perel, 2006). The same applies to the associations among intimacy, celebrated otherness, and ODA. Finally, based on previous research (Sims & Meana, 2010), which showed that duration and institutionalization of the relationship are associated with lower levels of sexual desire in women, we explored how length and type of relationship (steady or casual) are associated with sexual desire and other factors included in this study. In this study, 'casual relationship' and 'casual partner' refer to (interactions with) a sexual partner that is not considered 'steady' by the respondent (e.g., open relationship, 'friends with benefits', etc.).

## METHOD

### Pilot study

The questionnaires used to measure the concepts of celebrated otherness and ODA were developed and tested in a pilot study. Based on content analysis of the above mentioned

literature, an initial pool of items was generated for both constructs. Heterosexual women ( $N = 116$ ), recruited from a university student population, completed an online survey in which they could indicate the degree to which each of the items were applicable to their (steady or casual) relationship. Scales consisted of 5-point Likert scales ranging from 'not at all applicable' to 'completely applicable'. Using exploratory factor analysis and inter-item and item-total correlational analysis, the 'Celebrated Otherness Scale' (COS) was created based on 20 of the 32 initially generated items (e.g., 'I keep seeing him with fresh eyes' and 'I appreciate his complexity'). The 'Object of Desire Affirmation Scale' was based on 23 of 31 initially generated items (e.g., 'It is clear to me that he finds me attractive' and 'I am confident about myself as a sexual partner'). Cronbach's alphas for COS and ODAS were .90 and .89, respectively.

As part of the same pilot study, the questionnaires used to measure intimacy and sexual desire (see Main outcome measures) were translated from English using forward and backward translation procedures. Cronbach's alphas for the translated version of the Miller's Social Intimacy scale and the translated version of Hurlbert Index of Sexual Desire were .92 and .95, respectively.

## Main study

### Participants

A total of 662 pre-menopausal, self-identified heterosexual women from the Netherlands and Flanders (the Dutch speaking part of Belgium), completed an online survey. Their age ranged from 18 to 55 years ( $M = 30.68$ ,  $SD = 8.14$ ). Slightly more than half of the participants (56%) had a university degree and a third had a college degree (31%), the remaining respondents (13%) reported secondary or primary school as their highest level of education. Participants' average relationship duration was 4.98 years ( $SD = 6.11$ ). A total of 520 (78%) respondents



were in a relationship with a steady partner, the remaining 142 (22%) had a casual sexual partner.

#### Main outcome measures

*Intimacy* was assessed using Miller's Social Intimacy Scale (MSIS; Miller & Lefcourt, 1982), a questionnaire on emotional closeness consisting of 17 items (e.g., 'How much do you like to spend time alone with him?' and 'How affectionate do you feel toward him?'), with a 10-point Likert scale used for each question. Higher sum scores on the scale reflect higher intimacy. In the current sample, Cronbach's alpha for MSIS was .93.

*Celebrated otherness* was assessed using the Celebrated Otherness Scale (COS), a new multidimensional scale that was constructed and tested in the pilot study described above. COS assesses the following dimensions of celebrated otherness: 'to be intrigued', 'to have fun', 'to be wooed', and 'to be free'. The final version of COS, used in the current study's analyses, consists of 20 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 'not at all applicable' to 'completely applicable'). Higher sum scores on COS reflect higher levels of experienced celebrated otherness within the relationship. Cronbach's alpha in this sample was .90.

*Object of desire affirmation* was measured through the Object of Desire Affirmation Scale (ODAS), a new multidimensional scale that was constructed and tested in the same pilot study. ODAS assesses the following dimensions of ODA: 'to be a lover', 'to be desired', 'to feel sexually attractive', 'to claim sexual pleasure' and 'to have a vibrant sex life'. The final version of ODAS, used in this study, consists of 23 items scored on a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 'not at all applicable' to 'completely applicable'). Higher sum scores on ODAS reflect higher levels of object of desire affirmation. The dimension 'to claim sexual pleasure' is the only one with a negative contribution to the overall score, probably reflecting the

distinction between being an object (as measured by the rest of the scale) versus being a subject (as measured by this dimension) of desire. Cronbach's alpha in this sample was .89.

*Sexual desire* was measured through Hulbert Index of Sexual Desire (Apt & Hulbert, 1992), a 25-item scale (e.g., 'I look forward to having sex with my partner' and 'It's easy for me to go for weeks without sex with my partner' (reverse scored)) with a 5-point Likert scale (ranging from 'never' to 'always') attached to each item. Higher scores on the scale represent higher desire levels. Cronbach's alpha in the present sample was .96.

### Procedure

The survey, created in Qualtrics, was advertised through media interviews and participants were recruited through social media, online blogs, and online magazines. After providing informed consent, participants were presented with questionnaires covering demographics (e.g., age, gender, sexual orientation, relationship duration and type (steady or casual partner)) and the main variables of interest. Participants were explicitly instructed to keep the same (sexual) partner in mind while answering all questions. The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

### Data analysis

Data were analyzed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 22.0, Armonk, NY). Correlational analyses were used to assess univariate associations (Pearson's  $r$ ) among the various study variables. Multiple regression analysis was additionally conducted to explore how sexual desire as an outcome variable might be associated with the combination of all three dyadic factors as predictor variables. The significance level for all analyses was set at  $p < .05$ .

## RESULTS

The levels of sexual desire, intimacy, celebrated otherness and ODA are presented as means and standard deviations in Table 1. On average, participants with a casual sexual partner scored slightly higher ( $M = 76.16$ ,  $SD = 14.41$ ) than those with a steady partner ( $M = 62.19$ ,  $SD = 18.65$ ) on sexual desire. The scores of our participants with a steady partner are comparable to levels of sexual desire found in previous research with partnered women in non-clinical samples (Ferreira, Narciso, Novo, & Pereira, 2016; Hurlbert & Apt, 1994).

Correlational analyses were conducted in order to explore the associations among the dyadic factors included in this study, as well as their associations with sexual desire and relationship duration. The results are presented in Table 1. Significant and positive correlations were found between intimacy and celebrated otherness in women with either steady ( $r = .67$ ) or casual ( $r = .50$ ) partners, and between intimacy and ODA in women in a steady relationship ( $r = .41$ ). Celebrated otherness was also positively correlated with ODA in women with a steady partner ( $r = .64$ ) as well as in women with a casual partner ( $r = .56$ ). Intimacy ( $r = .29$ ), celebrated otherness ( $r = .46$ ) and ODA ( $r = .67$ ) correlated significantly and positively with sexual desire in women with a steady partner. In the same relational context, a negative correlation was found between relationship duration and intimacy ( $r = -.22$ ), celebrated otherness ( $r = -.34$ ), ODA ( $r = -.24$ ), and sexual desire ( $r = -.29$ ).

Simultaneously considering all three dyadic factors, multiple regression analysis revealed that in both steady ( $F(3, 516) = 138.90$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and casual relationships ( $F(3, 138) = 26.21$ ,  $p < .001$ ), only ODA was significantly associated with sexual desire (see Table 2). When analyses were run with the inclusion of relationship duration as a covariate, the predictive power of the model for women in a steady relationship slightly increased ( $\Delta R^2 = .02$ ,  $p < .001$ ), but the overall pattern of results did not change.

## DISCUSSION

Intimacy, celebrated otherness, and object of desire affirmation (ODA) emerged in this study, at least at the bivariate level, as mostly complementary dyadic processes. With the exception of the association between intimacy and ODA, which did not reach statistical significance in women interacting with a casual sexual partner, intimacy, celebrated otherness, and ODA showed positive intercorrelations. Additionally, they were all found to be positively associated with sexual desire, in women with steady as well as in women with casual sexual partners. The finding that the pattern of associations between these dyadic factors and sexual desire was the same for both relational contexts, provides support for the ecological validity of this study's findings. The findings also suggest that emotional closeness, appreciation of the differences between partners (cf. Perel, 2006), and 'selfishness' of focusing on one's own sexual needs (cf. Meana, 2010) do not exclude but rather reinforce each other. A possible explanation for this finding could be that intimacy provides the trust necessary to allow for the experience of separateness, and the safety needed for the expression of oneself as a sexual being. Celebrating otherness in the interaction and immersing oneself in the sexual acknowledgement by one's partner may conversely enhance the emotional significance attributed to and the emotional closeness experienced with them, based on the value they add through such positive experiences. Following the same line of reasoning, the lack of association found between intimacy and object of desire affirmation in casual relationships could imply that received sexual acknowledgement within such a relationship context does not necessarily feed back on intimacy in the same way and in the same degree as it does in a steady relationship. This could reflect a lower importance of intimacy as interpersonal goal within casual relationships (Garcia, Reiber, Massey, & Merriwether, 2012; Kelly, Zimmer-Gembeck, & Boislard-P, 2012). Obviously, further exploration of casual interactions and

associated partner dynamics is needed to fully understand if and how they may differ from those in committed relationships.

All dyadic factors were positively associated with desire, both in steady and in casual relationships. However, when controlling for each other's effects, only object of desire affirmation remained significant above and beyond intimacy and celebrated otherness. This unique role of object of desire affirmation was found in both types of relationships studied here, suggesting that whatever the relational context, sexual desire may mostly be 'a matter of sex'. This finding is particularly interesting in light of contemporary discussions about the importance of non-sexual factors in women's sexual responsiveness. While we acknowledge the role these factors play in determining sexual behavior in women, our findings suggest that what determines behavior may be different from what determines desire. Indeed, it has been found that women engage in sexual behavior for a broad range of reasons (Meston & Buss, 2009), including the wish to enhance intimacy, and the experience of intimacy may further reinforce women's willingness to have sex (Basson, 2000). However, sexual desire itself seems most closely associated with sexual aspects of their interactions, including their sexual arousal (Basson, 2000) and sexual excitement (Laan & Both, 2008). Consistent with these ideas, our findings suggest that while intimacy and celebrated otherness are positively associated with desire, the affirmation of one's sexual desirability is the most important correlate of sexual desire in women.

Decreased desire in long-term relationships has often been attributed to increased intimacy between partners, which may lead to overfamiliarity (Sims & Meana, 2010) or even 'fusion' (Perel, 2006). The results of the current study, however, do not support the idea that intimacy increases with relationship duration. In fact, intimacy was negatively correlated with the length of the relationship with a steady partner. The current study does, however, replicate earlier findings on the decline of sexual desire in long-term relationships and presents evidence

that celebrated otherness and ODA diminish as well. These results could imply that decreased desire is not so much related to an excess of intimacy as to a shortage of intimacy, celebrated otherness, and ODA that develops over the course of a relationship.

This study adds to the existing body of literature on sexual desire in women by exploring dyadic variables, in terms of interactions between partners, that have previously received little attention in empirical research. The simultaneous consideration of different theoretical insights within this study has revealed relations that would not have surfaced had the respective variables been studied separately. The findings of this study not only relate to the question whether or not intimacy, celebrated otherness, and object of desire affirmation are related to sexual desire in women, but also hint at their possible interplay and their development over the course of a relationship.

Some limitations of the study should be acknowledged. First, in addition to validated instruments, we used several new questionnaires to assess variables, including celebrated otherness and object of desire affirmation. Although the findings of this study provide some initial support for their use, further development and validation of these instruments is recommended. Second, the current study did not include potentially relevant covariates, such as the use of hormonal contraception or a history of sexual problems (including hypoactive sexual desire). Their inclusion in future research could add important nuances to our understanding of sexual desire in women. Further, we relied on the use of a convenience sample which limits generalization of the results to the general population. Finally, the cross-sectional nature of this study does not allow for causal inferences. We explored the influence of dyadic factors on sexual desire. However, there is also evidence that desire can exert influence on dyadic variables, including intimacy (Basson, 2000). Future studies could more systematically examine the causal impact of dyadic processes on sexual desire.

The current study provides a first empirical exploration of the constructs of celebrated otherness and object of desire affirmation and their association with sexual desire in women. Further research is needed to improve our understanding of their nature and of the role they play in the experience of sexual desire in women. Especially the finding suggesting that these factors are negatively associated with relationship duration warrants further exploration. Further, based on findings suggesting that women endorse different models of sexual desire depending on their sexual functioning (Sand & Fisher, 2007), it would be interesting to include measures of sexual function and health in future studies on dyadic processes and their impact on women's sexual desire. Finally, while the questionnaire used in this study to measure sexual desire includes items addressing responsive elements of desire (e.g., 'Just thinking about having sex with my partner excites me'), it does not make a clear distinction between responsive and spontaneous desire. As responsive desire is considered by some (e.g., Basson, 2000) to be more relevant to women than its spontaneous counterpart, explicitly focusing on that type of desire, especially in women in long-term relationships, is recommended for future research. In general, our findings support the recommendation of scholars and clinicians alike to approach sexual desire as a dyadic process. Further exploration of how dyadic processes influence sexual desire and unfold in daily interactions between partners, would not only enhance our theoretical understanding of dyadic sexual desire but also offer insights that may prove valuable in clinical practice, as they may help unravel the conditions for sexual desire to emerge and endure in long-term relationships.

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Table 1. Descriptives and Correlations among study variables

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Sexual Desire	Intimacy	Celebrated Otherness	ODA	Relation Duration	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Sexual Desire	76.16	14.41	-	.29**	.46**	.67**	-.29**	62.19	18.65
Intimacy	110.08	23.79	.18*	-	.67**	.41**	-.22**	136.98	15.58
Celebrated Otherness	77.01	11.14	.42**	.50**	-	.64**	-.34**	77.76	10.95
ODA	94.06	12.16	.59**	.16	.56**	-	-.24**	85.89	12.81
Relation Duration	1.06	1.93	-.04	-.03	-.16	-.00	-	6.05	6.42

Note. Correlations and descriptives on the right of the diagonal represent women with a steady partner (N = 520), correlations and descriptives on the left of the diagonal represent women with a casual partner (N = 142).

ODA = Object of Desire Affirmation

\*p < .05 (1-tailed), \*\*p < .01 (1-tailed)

*Table 2 Multiple regression of sexual desire by relationship type*

Relationship type	Predictor	$R^2$	$\beta$	$t$
Steady		.45		
	Intimacy		-.01	-.23
	Celebrated Otherness		.06	1.11
	ODA		.63	14.78**
Casual		.36		
	Intimacy		.04	.46
	Celebrated Otherness		.11	1.18
	ODA		.52	6.25**

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$