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**IS PROMISCUITY  
A NEUROTIC  
ACTIVITY OR WAS  
FREUD RIGHT?  
DIFFERENCES  
BETWEEN  
THE SEXES**

*71-83*

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**::POVZETEK****ALI JE PROMISKUITETA NEVROTIČNA DEJAVNOST ALI JE IMEL FREUD PRAV? RAZLIKE MED SPOLOMA**

GLEDE NA TO, DA je Sigmund Freud predvideval, da nevroza zavira izražanje spolnega gona v vsakodnevem življenju, nas je zanimalo, ali je promiskuiteta nevrotična dejavnost - ali pa je Freud vseeno imel prav? Ali so promiskuitetnejši ljudje res manj nevrotični od manj promiskuitetnih? Ali pri napovedovanju promiskuitete obstaja negativna interakcija med libidom in nevroticizmom? Ali v smislu odnosa med nevroticizmom in promiskuiteto obstajajo statistično značilne razlike med spoloma? Rezultati so pokazali, da promiskuiteta ni nevrotična dejavnost. Pri promiskuitetnejših ženskah sicer nismo mogli potrditi, da bi bile manj nevrotične, ampak promiskuitetnejši moški pa so statistično značilno manj nevrotični. Moški imajo v splošnem močnejši spolni gon od žensk. Pri napovedovanju promiskuitete smo ugotovili interakcijo med spolnim gonom in nevroticizmom, a le pri moških.

**Ključne besede:** Promiskuiteta, nevroticizem, libido, interakcija, spolne razlike

**ABSTRACT**

*Following Sigmund Freud's assumption that neurosis hinders enjoyment and active achievement in life, we wanted to know whether promiscuity is a neurotic activity - or was Freud right? Are more promiscuous people really less neurotic than the less promiscuous ones? Does neuroticism have any negative interaction with libido in predicting promiscuous sexual deeds? Are there any significant differences between the sexes regarding the relationship between neuroticism and promiscuity? Our research shows that promiscuity is not a neurotic activity. More promiscuous women do not appear to be less neurotic, but more promiscuous men could well be less neurotic. Men generally appear to have a higher libido from women. A significant interaction between the sexual drive and neuroticism in predicting promiscuity was found, albeit in men only.*

*Keywords:* Promiscuity, neuroticism, libido, interaction, sex differences

## ::INTRODUCTION

Sigmund Freud defined libido as "... in the first instance the force (thought of as quantitatively variable and measurable) of the sexual instincts directed towards an object ..." (Freud, 1924 [1923]). It is the instinct energy or force, contained in what Freud called the id, the unconscious structure of the psyche. Building on the work of Karl Abraham, Freud gradually developed the idea of a series of developmental phases in which the libido fixates on different erogenous zones - first in the oral stage (as shown by an infant's pleasure in nursing), then in the anal stage (shown by a toddler's pleasure in controlling his or her bowels), then in the phallic stage, through a latency stage in which the libido is quiescent, to its re-emergence during puberty in the genital stage. These libidinal drives can struggle with the conventions of civilized behaviour that are represented in the psyche by the superego. It is this need to conform to society and control the libido that leads to tension and disturbance in the individual, provoking the use of ego defences to dispel the psychic energy of these unmet and mostly unconscious needs into other forms. It is the excessive use of ego defences that results in neurosis. The primary goal of psychoanalysis is to convey the drives of the id into consciousness, allowing them to be encountered directly and thus reducing the patient's reliance on the defences of the ego (Freud 1886-1939).

A neurosis, according to Freud, is the formation of behavioural or psychosomatic symptoms as a result of the return of the repressed. Freud says that there are indeed cases in which the physician himself must admit that the solution of a conflict by a neurosis is one of the most harmless and most socially tolerable ones. The neurotic has several debilitating symptom-formations that hinder enjoyment and active achievement in life (Freud 1886-1939). In terms of our research question, since promiscuity is a manifest activity, the latter could mean that the more promiscuous people could show less neuroticism than the less promiscuous ones.

A person only falls ill of a neurosis if their ego has lost the capacity to allocate its libido in some way. The failure of the ego and the increased insistence of the libido lead to symptoms that are as bad or even worse than the conflict they are designed to replace. The symptom is a substitute for the instinctual impulse but one that is so reduced, displaced, and distorted that it is often not recognizable as a gratification but looks more like a compulsion or even an illness (Freud 1886-1939).

Promiscuity, then, could be seen as an activity that is quite opposite to neurosis. Freud stressed that, while childhood sexuality involved a wide and unfocused range of perverse activities in contrast to adult perversion, there was:

“... an important difference between them. Perverse sexuality is as a rule excellently centred: all its activities are directed to an aim - usually a single one; one component instinct has gained the upper hand... In that respect there is no difference between perverse and normal sexuality other than the fact that their dominating component instincts and consequently their sexual aims are different. In both of them, one might say, a well-organized tyranny has been established, but in each of the two a different family has seized the reins of power.” (Freud 1915-1916)

Perversion as the opposite of neurosis was further elaborated by Otto Fenichel and other early psychoanalysts. Fenichel goes on about perversion as:

“... experiences of sexual satisfactions which simultaneously gave a feeling of security by denying or contradicting some fear ... Some people think that perverts are enjoying some kind of more intense sexual pleasure than normal people. This is not true ... Neurotics, who have repressed perverse longings, may envy the perverts who express the perverse longings openly.” (Fenichel 1945)

According to Freud and other early psychoanalysts, promiscuity would obviously not be a neurotic activity, but quite the contrary - it could be closer to the concept of perversion.

## **::A NOTE ON NEUROSIS AND NEUROTICISM**

While the construct that we call “neuroticism” in scientific psychology may not be exactly the same as the Freud’s psychoanalytic concept of the term “neurosis”, it is quite clear that we are in both instances talking about the very same dimension of personality. Neurosis is an actual disorder of personality, such as obsessive thoughts or anxiety, while neuroticism is the state of having the disorder. Therefore, with neuroticism, actual neurosis can be measured. Neuroticism in psychology is defined as a set of relatively stable personality traits such as depression, anxiety, moodiness, worry, envy, and jealousy. At the opposite end of the spectrum, individuals who score low in neuroticism are emotionally relatively stable and less reactive to stress. They are able to effectively perceive that ordinary situations are not threatening and they react and act accordingly (Matthews & Deary 1998, Musek 2010). Since promiscuity is a manifest sexual activity (in contrast, for example, to sexual fantasies), this could imply that the more emotionally stable (i.e. less neurotic) people could, perhaps, also be more promiscuous.

## **::LIBIDO: IS FREUDIAN CONCEPT OF LIBIDO MEASURABLE?**

The way we measure libido in the post-modern scientific psychology is one thing and could in theory differ from what Freud really meant by the term. But Freud's aim was decidedly psychological. This is evident in the way he elaborates on the libido, describing it as:

“... the force (thought of as *quantitatively variable and measurable*) of the sexual instincts directed towards an object ...” (Freud, 1924 [1923], italics mine)

While the Freud's era lacked quantitative instruments to measure libido, some instruments have been developing during the century of psychoanalysis and scientific psychology after him. It has become increasingly possible to quantify the measure of libido both within an individual and in the population with some scientific methods.

## **::THE AIMS OF THE RESEARCH AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

Our research questions are the following: Is promiscuity a neurotic activity or was Freud right? In other words, are more promiscuous people really less neurotic than the less promiscuous ones? We would also like to know whether neuroticism has any negative interaction with libido in predicting promiscuous sexual deeds. Also, are there any significant differences between the sexes regarding the relationship between neuroticism and promiscuity?

## **::HOW TO DEFINE PROMISCUITY?**

The Webster dictionary defines promiscuity as a) indiscriminate [sexual] mingling, and b) a brief or random social [sexual] exchange or relation (Webster 1993). There appear two dimensions of promiscuity in its very definition. One is the non-choosiness (indiscriminateness of the sexual partner), and the other one is the randomness and briefness of sexual consummation. The focus of our research was promiscuity as a manifest sexual activity - in contrast to promiscuous views about sexual life or promiscuous sexual fantasies, to quote just the two most obvious ones.

## ::METHOD

### ::Participants and Procedure

Among the participants there were 397 women and 127 men from the general public of Slovenia, aged between 18 and 75 years ( $M = 33.89$ ,  $SD = 10.33$ ). Beside the general questionnaire about their age, marital status, gender, sexual orientation, etc., participants also filled out the following questionnaires:

- IPIP Neo 120 questionnaire (Goldberg, 1999), to measure neuroticism, along with the other big four dimensions of personality,
- The Revised Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI-R; Penke & Asendorpf, 2008), to measure Sociosexual orientation (SOI-R behaviour, and SOI-R desire), as well as the Sexual Drive Questionnaire (SDQ; Ostovich, 2004) in order to measure sexual drive, and the Sexual compulsivity Scale (SCS; Kalichman & Rompa, 1995) to measure sexual compulsivity.

In addition, we also designed two questions to measure promiscuity at the year when it was most pronounced.

Libido was therefore measured as a three-dimensional construct:

- as sexual desire (SOI-R questionnaire, Penke & Asendorpf, 2008),
- as sex drive (SDQ, Ostovich 2004), and
- as sexual compulsivity (SCS; Kalichman & Rompa, 1995).

### ::Procedure

The research was designed as a multivariate model. Differences in promiscuity, libido and neuroticism between the sexes were tested. Since some of the differences were significant (they are shown later on in this writing), we proceeded with two separate analyses for the sexes. There are three variables that measure promiscuity (SOI-R-behaviour, as well as the two questions that measure sexual behaviour in the year of one's most intense sexual life).

We found out that the five items (among them were the three that measure the actual sexual behaviour from SOI-R), have a good inner consistency, at Cronbach  $\alpha = .834$ :

With how many different people (besides your one committed relationship) did you have sexual contact within the year of your life (12 months) when you were most sexually active?

How many of these sexual encounters with each person took place on one and only one occasion (in case you do not remember exactly, please give an estimation)?

With how many different partners have you had sex within the past 12 months?

With how many different partners have you had sexual intercourse on *one and only one* occasion?

With how many different partners have you had sexual intercourse without having an interest in a long-term committed relationship with this person?

The last three items are taken from the SOI-R questionnaire.

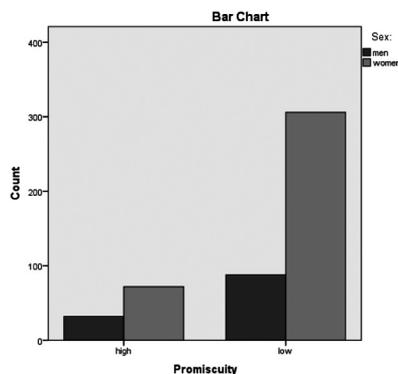
Three other items that measure sexual drive were also taken from the SOI-R questionnaire, together forming the SOI-R desire item. Together with the SCS (Sexual Compulsivity Scale) and SDQ (Sexual Drive Questionnaire) we ran a factorial analysis of the variables in order to obtain one single variable as the measure of libido, and then again tested for differences between the sexes. The exploratory factorial analysis confirmed the existence of one factor, explaining 63% of total variance (KMO at .667 and Bartlett test significant at  $p = .000$ ).

## ::RESULTS

### ::Differences between the sexes in promiscuity and libido

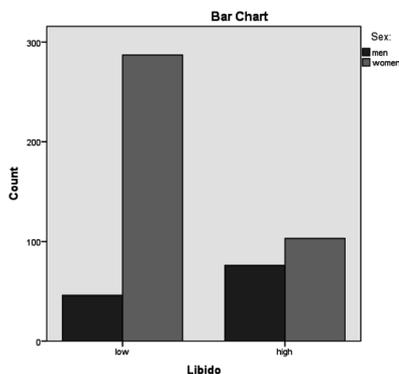
Two clusters were formed in order to classify promiscuity (higher and lower promiscuity), as well as two clusters to classify libido (higher and lower libido). 19% of women and 27% of men were classified into the more promiscuous cluster. Crosstabs show the differences in promiscuity between the sexes are nearly significant ( $\chi^2 = 3.200, p = .074$ ) (Graph 1). However, the Mann-Whitney test showed the differences in the means were not significant ( $p = .335$ ).

In contrast, there was a pronounced difference between the sexes found in libido (Graph 2). 26% of women were found to have a stronger libido - in a stark contrast to 62% of men ( $\chi^2 = .000$ ), Mann-Whitney confirming sig-



Graph 1: Differences between the sexes in promiscuity.

nificant differences in means at  $p = .000$ , effect size at  $r = -.35$ . Our finding conforms with some previous research on sociosexuality (Penke & Asendorpf, 2008). Very convincingly however, no significant differences between the sexes were found in neuroticism ( $\chi^2 = .730$ , Mann-Whitney at  $p = .96$ ). Although women generally score more highly on neuroticism worldwide, some previous research indeed also found that in some countries, Slovenia inclusive, no significant differences between the sexes in neuroticism appear (McCrae, Terracciano et al., 2005).

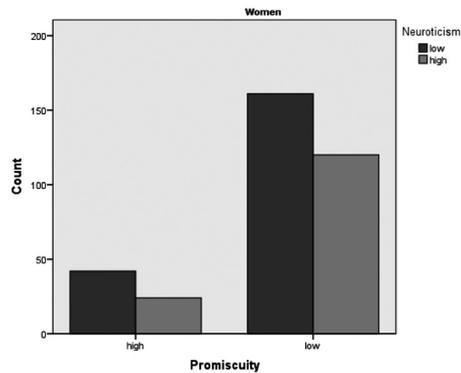


*Graph 2: The differences in libido between the sexes.*

We ran a discriminant analysis in order to see which discriminant function most successfully classifies women and men. The group means were found to be significantly different for libido ( $p = .000$ ) and for promiscuity ( $p = .014$ ), but not significantly different for neuroticism ( $p = .705$ ). Box's M value was 16,425 ( $p = .012$ ), and canonical correlation .350 ( $p = .000$ ). The discriminant function shows that only libido can be a successful predictor of the participants' sex, whereas neuroticism and promiscuity do not prove to be so. Classification would be successful for 71% of women, and for 63% of men. On the whole, classification would be successful in 69% of all cases.

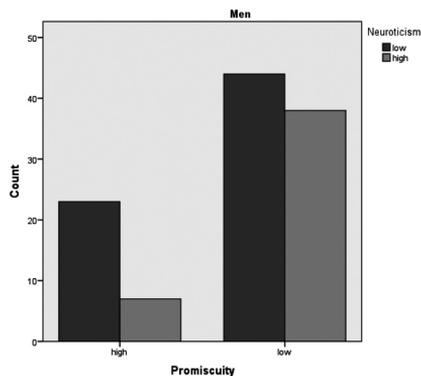
Are more promiscuous people really less neurotic than the less promiscuous ones?

In order to find an answer to this question, we ran crosstabs among the two clusters of more and less promiscuous participants and the two clusters of more and less neurotic participants. Two separate analyses for women and men were performed. In women, no significant differences were found ( $\chi^2 = .885$ ,  $p = .347$ ). In the more promiscuous cluster, there were 36% of more neurotic women participants, whereas into the less promiscuous cluster, 43% of more neurotic women participants were classified (Graph 3).



*Graph 3: No difference found in neuroticism between the more and less promiscuous women.*

In the male sample however, the differences proved to be significant ( $\chi^2 = 4.838, p = .028$ ). Only 23% of more neurotic men were classified into the more promiscuous cluster, whereas 46% of more neurotic men were found in the less promiscuous cluster (Graph 4).



*Graph 4: Differences in neuroticism among more and less promiscuous men are significant.*

### **::The direct role of neuroticism and libido in predicting promiscuity**

Beside some small negative correlation between neuroticism and PROMall in women ( $r = -.108, p = .044$ , not significant in men), regression models showed that in both sexes, we could not find out that neuroticism could significantly predict promiscuity. This is in line with some previous research that was performed on a worldwide International Sexuality Description Project, where 13,243 participants from 46 nations responded to self-report measures

of personality and mating behaviour (Schmitt & Shackelford, 2008). There it was also found out that both in North America and Western Europe, neuroticism in men was not associated with short-term mating orientation - in contrast to women, where there existed a small correlation between the two.

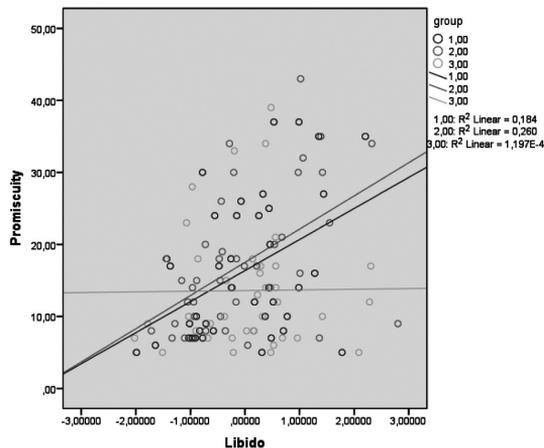
However, things seem to turn out differently in regards to the connection between the level of libido (gLIBmen and gLIBwom respectively) and promiscuity (PROMall). Our research confirms that libido significantly predicts promiscuity in men ( $\beta = .324$ ,  $p = .000$ ), as well as in women ( $\beta = .251$ ,  $p = .000$ ), albeit the levels of libido in the sexes being significantly different. However, we still do not know what role neuroticism could play in predicting promiscuity, if any.

Testing interaction between neuroticism and libido in predicting promiscuity

Another aim of our research question was to test Freud's claim that high neurotic characteristics could hinder the expression of libido in the direct, i.e. manifest sexual life. If Freud was right, then there would have to exist, with higher levels of neuroticism, things being equal with libido, a lower level of promiscuity. One way to find out about this would be to test the interaction between libido and neuroticism in predicting promiscuity.

In order to test this assumption, a regression model was used, in which three predictors were included in order to forecast promiscuity: libido, neuroticism, as well as the interaction between the two.

In men, the interaction between libido and neuroticism proved to be significant in predicting promiscuity ( $\beta = -.203$  at  $p = .023$ ). As expected, libido significantly predicts promiscuity as well ( $\beta = .327$  at  $p = .000$ ), neuroticism in this model surprisingly nearly reaching its significance ( $\beta = -.170$ ,  $p = .057$ ). Regression model on the whole explains 16,3 % of total variance (multiple  $R = .404$ ,  $p = .000$ ). Correlations among the predicting variables are all non-significant. The graph (Graph 5) illustrates the interaction between libido and neuroticism in predicting promiscuity in men. On the x-axis, there is libido as the predictor for promiscuity, the latter being on the y-axis. Three different groups of 40 to 41 cases each were created (of high, medium and low neuroticism) in order to test the effect of interaction. Group 1 consists of cases of low neuroticism, group 2 of cases with medium neuroticism, and group 3 of cases with high neuroticism. Please note that the lines of the first and the second group are very close together due to very similar regression coefficients ( $R^2$  being .184 and .260 respectively). The graph shows that in the instances of groups 1 and 2, libido significantly and successfully predicts promiscuity, whereas in the instances of high neuroticism (group 3), libido ceases to predict promiscuity completely. Its regression line is almost the same as the average value of the sample.



*Graph 5: Testing interaction between libido and neuroticism in predicting promiscuity.*

However, we did not find any significant interaction between libido and neuroticism in predicting promiscuity in women. Therefore, the same regression model does not prove to be significant there.

Concluding summation and discussion

Our research shows that promiscuity is not a neurotic activity. Despite some modest correlation between neuroticism and promiscuity that appears in women only, neuroticism does not predict promiscuity in regression analysis - neither by itself, nor in a multiple regression model together with libido as a predictor in both women and men. However, some differences between the sexes regarding the question whether more promiscuity means less neuroticism are indicated. More promiscuous women do not appear to be less neurotic, but more promiscuous men could well be less neurotic. Further research in order to confirm this finding would be needed.

There are other significant differences in promiscuity among the sexes. Generally, it remains possible that men could be more promiscuous than women, but more research would be needed in order to confirm this. However, there is a clear and very significant difference between the sexes in the level of libido. Men generally appear to have a higher libido from women.

However, there appears a significant interaction between the sexual drive (libido) and neuroticism in predicting promiscuity, albeit we found it significant in case of men only. This is the indirect role of neuroticism in predicting promiscuity that only becomes transparent in combination with libido. In men with high neuroticism, the level of libido ceases to predict promiscuity, whereas in medium and low cases of neuroticism, promiscuity can be significantly successfully predicted by the level of the sexual drive. In other

words, with higher levels of neuroticism, things being equal with libido, a lower level of promiscuity may generally be expected in reality. Neuroticism indeed seems to play a role in determining to what extent libido can be used for free sexual activity, thus hindering one's free sexual expression in life. Freud could be right, after all.

But curiously enough, could this indeed be true for men only?

The interpretation of this possible difference between the sexes could profit on credibility from some further consideration and research. Libido generally does significantly predict promiscuity in women as well (whereas neuroticism does not), but contrary to the male sample, no significant interaction was found between neuroticism and libido predicting female promiscuity.

A limitation of our research is also connected to the fact that we did not measure sexuality within actual partnerships and have concentrated on promiscuity only. It would be interesting to compare our findings with research on actual sexual life within the existing intimate relationships.

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