

THE ROLE OF SEXUAL DESIRE AND SEXUAL ACTIVITY IN DATING RELATIONSHIPS

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Previous research indicates that adults believe that sexual desire and sexual activity play different roles in love relationships. Little research, however, has been conducted to document the presumed differences between these two aspects of human sexual response. The purpose of this study was to examine empirically (1) whether sexual desire and sexual activity co-occur in dating relationships; (2) whether desire is more strongly associated than activity with passionate love; and (3) whether desire and activity have different implications for relationship maintenance. The results revealed that sexual desire and sexual activity were moderately (but not significantly) related. In addition, and as expected, only sexual desire was related to passionate love. Sexual desire also was related to relational maintenance; the greater the desire for the partner, the less often participants thought about ending their current relationship, thought about beginning a new relationship, reported being unfaithful to their partner, and felt attracted to others.

Many individuals believe that sexuality is associated with, and implicated in, several significant human life experiences and interpersonal events. They also appear to believe that different sexual responses (e.g., desire, activity, arousal) play particular roles in these interpersonal events and experiences. For example, both men and women clearly associate *sexual desire* — the subjective, motivational component of sexuality — with passionate love. The majority of young adults spontaneously think of sexual desire when asked to define the state of “being in love” (Regan, Kocan, & Whitlock, 1998), and conclude that dating partners who do not desire each other sexually are not in love (Regan, 1998a). Conversely, *sexual activity* — the physical, behavioral aspect of sexuality — is per-

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ceived as particularly integral to a relationship's stage of development. For example, adolescents and adults view sexual intercourse between two people as more acceptable in later (e.g., engaged) than in earlier (e.g., first date) stages of relational progression (see Sprecher & McKinney, 1993).

Both of these sexual responses, to varying degrees, occur within romantic relationships. Interestingly, however, little research has been conducted to document the presumed differences between these two aspects of human sexuality. The present study was designed to examine empirically the role played by sexual desire and sexual activity in romantic relationships. In particular, I wished to explore the association between these types of sexual response and several important interpersonal experiences (e.g., passionate and companionate love, satisfaction, infidelity) in a sample of young adults involved in dating relationships.

DISTINCTIONS BETWEEN SEXUAL DESIRE AND SEXUAL ACTIVITY

Sexual desire and sexual activity are presumed to have different implications for romantic relationships.

Association with passionate love. Sexual desire is assumed to be more closely associated than sexual activity with the experience of passionate love. Indeed, the notion that sexual desire is a distinguishing feature of passionate love is a common theme running through love discourse in such diverse disciplines as sexual pathology and medicine (e.g., H. Ellis, 1933/1963; Krafft-Ebing, 1886/1945), psychiatry and psychoanalysis (e.g., A. Ellis, 1954; Freud, 1912/1963; Reik, 1945), existential philosophy (e.g., Fromm, 1956), and theology (e.g., Lewis, 1960). In addition, contemporary social psychological discourse on love suggests that the experience of passionate love is strongly linked with sexual desire (see, for example, Regan & Berscheid, 2000).

Research on beliefs about passionate love using adult populations supports these theoretical contentions. For example, Regan and colleagues (1998) asked 120 undergraduate men and women to list in a free response format all of the features which they considered to be characteristic or prototypical of the state of passionate love ("being in love"). Out of 119 features spontaneously generated by the participants, sexual desire received the second highest frequency rating (65.8%). In addition, this feature was viewed as more important to the passionate love concept than such behavioral sexual events as kissing (cited by only 10% of participants), touching/holding (cited by 17.5%), and sexual activity (cited by 25%).

In sum, although some adults may engage in intercourse and other sexual behaviors as a way of expressing their feelings of love for one another, sexual activity does not appear to be as integral a component of the passionate love experience as does sexual desire. Therefore, I expected that the amount of sexual desire — but not sexual activity — which men and women experience in their dating relationships would be positively correlated with their feelings of passion-

ate love. A corollary assumption was that sexual desire would not be associated in any significant manner with feelings of companionate love or liking (two other varieties of interpersonal attraction).

Association with relationship quality. In addition, sexual desire and sexual activity may have different implications for relationship quality. For example, clinical studies and case reports suggest that marital partners often use sexual desire as an indicant of overall relationship adjustment; specifically, a marked decrease or absence of sexual desire experienced by one or both members of a couple increasingly appears to be interpreted as a "problem" that requires correction, usually through some form of therapeutic intervention (e.g., Kaplan, 1979; Leiblum & Rosen, 1988; Trudel, 1991). In addition, person perception experiments indicate that men and women view dating partners who feel sexual desire for each other as significantly more likely to experience "positive" interpersonal events (e.g., happiness, satisfaction) and less likely to experience "negative" interpersonal events (e.g., infidelity) than partners who do not desire each other sexually (e.g., Regan, 1998a).

Sexual activity also is associated with relational quality. Several researchers have documented the association between marital satisfaction and rates of sexual activity (e.g., Donnelly, 1993). For example, Hatfield and colleagues (1982) report that people who feel that their marriages are fair and equitable have sex more often than those who feel that their relationships are inequitable. In addition, couples who enjoy spending time together and who share social activities and hobbies have sexual intercourse with greater frequency than couples who share few outside activities (e.g., Bhumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

In sum, both desire and activity may be correlated with overall relationship satisfaction. However, it is possible that people in general attach greater significance to their feelings of desire than to their actual sexual activities. That is, the fact that one has sex with one's partner may not mean as much in terms of relationship quality or maintenance as the fact that one *wants* to have sex with one's partner. Therefore, I hypothesized that men and women who experience high amounts of desire for their dating partners will be less likely to think about ending the current relationship, to consider alternative dating partners, and to be unfaithful to the existing partner.

METHOD

PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Participants were 25 men and 25 women (average age = 21.8 years) who were currently involved in a dating relationship. All were heterosexual (100%) and had been in their respective relationships an average of 14 months. Participants described themselves as Caucasian (40%), Latino/a (30%), Asian (20%), and African American (10%). The majority were sexually experienced (64%). Partici-

pants completed the measures individually at a designated research site and received course credit for their time.

MEASURES

Sexuality Variables

Participants received the following definitions of sexual desire and sexual activity (adapted from Regan & Berscheid, 1995, 2000):

Sexual desire can be understood broadly as an interest in sexual objects or activities, or as a wish, longing, or craving to engage in sexual activities with another person. Sexual desire is not the same as sexual activity (e.g., kissing, masturbation, intercourse) or sexual arousal (e.g., vaginal lubrication, erections).

Sexual activity, for the purposes of this study, is defined as sexual behavior that involves both members of the couple (you and your partner). Sexual activity may include such behaviors as kissing and caressing, "heavy petting" or "making out," oral sex, mutual masturbation, and sexual intercourse.

Participants then were asked to indicate the amount or quantity of sexual desire they currently experienced for their partner, using a 9-point Likert-type scale (1 = *none/very little*, 9 = *very high amount*). In addition, they reported the number of different occasions per week in which they engaged in sexual activities with their partner.

Emotional Experience Variables

Participants reported the amount or quantity they currently experienced of 9 different emotions for their partner, using a 9-point Likert-type scale (with 1 = *none/very little* and 9 = *a great deal/very high amount*). These emotional events were randomized for each participant and included the items *satisfaction*, *frustration*, *happiness*, *passionate love* (further described as the "state of being in love"), *anger*, *liking*, *jealousy*, *anxiety*, and *companionate love* (further described as "a type of love based on deep caring and affection").

Relationship Maintenance Variables

Participants also were asked to report how often in the past week they thought about ending the present relationship, thought about starting a relationship with someone else, "cheated" on the partner (defined as "going on a date or engaging in other types of romantic activities and/or having sex with or engaging in other types of sexual activities with someone other than your partner"), and felt sexual desire or attraction for another person (1 = *never*, 9 = *extremely often*).

RESULTS

PRELIMINARY ANALYSES

In general, both men (7.80) and women (7.24) reported experiencing relatively high amounts of sexual desire for their partners. In addition, they engaged in sexual activities approximately 10 times a week (for men, 11.08 sexual occasions; for women, 8.71 sexual events). Interestingly, sexual desire and sexual activity were only moderately (and not significantly) correlated ($r = .35$ for men, $r = .48$ for women).

ASSOCIATION WITH LOVE AND OTHER EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES

Table 1 presents, for men and women, the correlations between sexual desire and sexual activity and variables representing love and other emotional experiences. Strong support was found for the hypothesis that sexual desire is the aspect of human sexuality most closely associated with passionate love. Specifically, sexual desire was significantly positively correlated with the amount of passionate love — but not with the amount of companionate love — that participants felt for their partners. In addition, sexual activity was unrelated to both types of love assessed in the present study.

TABLE 1
ASSOCIATION OF SEXUAL DESIRE AND SEXUAL ACTIVITY WITH EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES AND RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE

Variable	Sexual Desire		Sexual Activity	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Emotional Experiences				
Passionate love	.42**	.39*	-.17	.07
Companionate love	.13	-.19	-.12	-.25
Liking	.21	.08	-.05	-.08
Happiness	.30	.19	.06	.29
Satisfaction	.36*	.36*	.48*	.41*
Anger	.07	.04	-.54*	-.31
Anxiety	-.14	.18	.05	.02
Jealousy	-.04	.11	.06	.07
Frustration	-.34*	-.24	-.33	-.30
Relationship Maintenance				
Infidelity (behaviors)	-.57*	-.27	-.23	.11
Termination (thoughts of)	-.37*	-.51*	-.64**	-.30
New relationship (thoughts of)	-.51**	-.59**	-.10	-.32
Sexual desire (for another)	-.22	-.35*	-.14	.09

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

For both sexes, sexual desire for the partner also was related to self-reported satisfaction (i.e., the more sexual desire felt for the partner, the more satisfaction participants experienced). In addition, for men (but not women), sexual desire was negatively related to feelings of general frustration with the partner.

Like sexual desire, sexual activity was related to self-reported satisfaction with the partner, for both men and women. For men, but not for women, sexual activity was negatively correlated with anger (i.e., the greater the amount of sexual activity in the relationship, the less anger men experienced).

ASSOCIATION WITH RELATIONSHIP MAINTENANCE VARIABLES

For both men and women, sexual desire was strongly related to the frequency of thoughts about ending the relationship and about starting a relationship with another person. That is, the higher the amount of desire men and women felt for their partners, the less frequently did they think about leaving the relationship and consider beginning a relationship with a new partner. In addition, for men (but not women), self-reported sexual desire was negatively correlated with frequency of "cheating" on the partner (e.g., dating or engaging in sexual activities with another person). The more a man desired his partner sexually, the less likely he was to seek out other women for romantic and/or sexual activities. For women (but not men), self-reported desire for the partner was negatively related to sexual attraction to others; the more a woman desired her partner, the less often she desired other men.

For men, but not for women, sexual activity was negatively correlated with frequency of thoughts about ending the present relationship.

DISCUSSION

The primary goal of this study was to examine, in a sample of romantically involved individuals, the relation between sexual desire and sexual activity and a variety of emotional and relational experiences. In particular, I explored whether these aspects of sexuality are related, whether one is more strongly associated than the other with passionate love and other emotions, and whether they play different or similar roles in relationship maintenance.

The results revealed that sexual desire and sexual activity were not significantly related (that is, they did not strongly co-occur). Although somewhat surprising, this result is in accord with previous research. For example, Beck, Bozman, and Qualtrough (1991) asked college students whether they had ever been involved in sexual activity without sexual desire. The majority of both the men (60%) and the women (82%) in their sample responded affirmatively. More recently, Regan (1997) asked a sample of undergraduates a similar question and reported that over half of the women and almost a fourth of the men stated that they had engaged in noncoercive but undesired sexual activities. It appears, then, that the occurrence of sexual activity does not necessarily imply a desire for such activity, at least in young adults. Similarly, a lack of sexual activity may not reflect a lack of interest. For example, cultural proscriptions against intercourse and other forms of sexual activity during menstruation may result in a self- or partner-imposed abstinence

which speaks more to social influence than to personal inclination. In addition, some sexual activities (e.g., intercourse) are heavily dependent upon partner willingness and availability (for additional discussion, see Regan & Berscheid, 2000). In sum, although sexual desire undoubtedly is closely associated with, and often precedes, sexual activity, the results of this study highlight the importance of maintaining a theoretical and empirical distinction between these aspects of human sexual response.

Based upon a consideration of previous theoretical and empirical work, sexual desire and passionate love were hypothesized to share a unique connection. Specifically, I expected that the self-reported amount of sexual desire would be significantly positively correlated with the experience of passionate — but not companionate — love, and that the occurrence of sexual activity would be unrelated to feelings of passionate love. This is precisely what I found. The men and women in this sample who felt the greatest amount of sexual desire for their dating partners were also those who reported the most passionate love. These feelings of desire were unrelated, however, to the amount of companionate love (and liking) which they experienced for their partners. Moreover, sexual activity (as measured by the mean weekly number of sexual events in which participants engaged with their partners) was associated with neither passionate nor companionate love (and also was unrelated to amount of liking for the partner). This pattern of results provides strong evidence that desire is the component of sexuality which is most closely related to passionate love, and suggests that passionate love is to some extent dependent upon feelings of desire (although the correlational design utilized in the present study precludes a causal conclusion).

The final goal of this research endeavor was to examine the role played by sexual desire in dating relationships, and to compare it with that of sexual activity. As noted earlier, men and women view dating partners who desire each other sexually as “healthier” and as less in need of counseling than partners who are not sexually attracted to one another (Regan, 1998a). Similarly, clinical case studies suggest that a loss or absence of desire is interpreted with alarm by relational partners (e.g., Kaplan, 1979; Leiblum & Rosen, 1988). The results of this study are in accord with this earlier work. Specifically, in addition to experiencing significantly greater amounts of passionate love, participants who reported higher amounts of sexual desire for their partners were more satisfied, were less likely to think about ending the current relationship, and were less likely to consider beginning a relationship with a new partner than participants who felt lower amounts of desire. Feelings of sexual desire also were associated with feelings of frustration and with self-reported infidelity, for men, and with sexual attraction to other individuals, for women (i.e., the more a man desired his partner, the less frustrated he became with her, and the less likely he was to date and/or engage in sexual activities with other women; the more a woman desired her partner, the less likely she was to become

sexually attracted to other men). Thus, sexual desire does appear to have implications for the emotional tenor and adjustment of dating relationships.

Like sexual desire, sexual activity was associated with self-reported satisfaction for both sexes. Also the amount of sexual activity with the partner was related, for men but not for women, to anger and to thoughts of relationship termination. That is, the greater the number of sexual episodes involving the partner in which a man engaged, the less anger he felt for that individual and the less often he thought about ending the relationship.

In short, sexuality plays an important role in dating relationships. Both the subjective, psychological experience of sexual desire and the physical experience of sexual activity are associated with satisfaction with both the partner and the relationship. Moreover, sexual desire clearly is essential to the maintenance of that relationship — men and women who reported little sexual desire for their partners also experienced low levels of passionate love, and reported having considered ending the present relationship and seeking alternative partners. Without desire (and its corresponding feeling of being “in love”), individuals apparently feel relatively uninvolved with the relationship and uncommitted to the partner, regardless of their level of sexual activity. Desire thus serves as an important, perhaps the most important, sexual index of relationship quality.

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