

ORIGINAL RESEARCH

The Mediating Role of Sexual Behavior in Event-Level Associations Between Sexual Difficulties and Sexual Satisfaction in Newlywed Mixed-Sex Couples

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Many sexual difficulties encountered by couples in their day-to-day lives, although of insufficient intensity and persistence to warrant a clinical diagnosis of sexual disorder, are nevertheless frequent and a source of individual and relational distress.

Aim: The aim of this study was to assess the event-level associations between couples' everyday, subclinical sexual difficulties (specifically, low subjective sexual arousal, low physiological sexual arousal, and genito-pelvic pain), the range of sexual behaviors that these couples engage in, and their sexual satisfaction.

Methods: 70 Newlywed participants (35 couples, average age = 25.6 years, SD = 3.2 years; average duration of relationship = 5.4 years, SD = 3.4 years) individually completed daily diaries about sexual difficulties, range of activities performed during sex, and sexual satisfaction over the course of 5 weeks. Analyses were guided by the actor-partner interdependence model.

Main Outcome Measure: The main outcome was sexual satisfaction, measured at the event-level on a 5-point Likert scale using a single-item question.

Results: On days of sexual activity, men and women's difficulties with subjective sexual arousal were associated with lower sexual satisfaction in both partners (actor and partner effects). This association was mediated by the range of couples' sexual behaviors, such that lower subjective arousal was associated with a more restricted range of sexual activities, which in turn was associated with lower sexual satisfaction. Men's and women's difficulties with physiological sexual arousal, and women's genito-pelvic pain, were each associated with their own lower sexual satisfaction. No partner effects were observed for these sexual difficulties, nor were they mediated by the range of couples' sexual activities.

Clinical Implications: The study's results highlight how couples' sexual difficulties can interfere with same-day sexual satisfaction, and how for subjective sexual arousal, this interference is reflected by a more restricted range of sexual behaviors.

Strength & Limitations: Strengths of the study include the daily diary methodology, which allowed a focus on event-level sexual activities with minimal retrospective bias. Further, the dyadic analyses allowed both intra-individual and inter-individual effects to be assessed. Limitations include the lack of a more general measure of sexual desire and of a more diverse sample, in terms of age, race, and sexual orientation.

Conclusion: These findings underscore the importance of treatments that include both partners, and that target the types as well as range of sexual activities in which couples engage. **Jodouin J-F, Bergeron S, Janssen E. The Mediating Role of Sexual Behavior in Event-Level Associations Between Sexual Difficulties and Sexual Satisfaction in Newlywed Mixed-Sex Couples. J Sex Med 2018;XX:XXX–XXX.**

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Key Words: Sexual Difficulties; Subjective Sexual Arousal; Physiological Sexual Arousal; Sexual Pain; Sexual Behavior; Dyadic Diary Study

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INTRODUCTION

Sexual difficulties are a source of distress in the daily lives of many couples. Sexual difficulties are prevalent in the general population, with estimates ranging from 31–50% for men and 43–77% for women.^{1,2} Of these sexual difficulties, many are subclinical, in that the intensity, persistence, and duration of the symptoms are insufficient to be diagnosed as a sexual disorder. Despite their lower intensity, subclinical sexual difficulties nevertheless may cause significant distress in couples. Studies have reported associations between problematic sexual functioning and poor personal and relational outcomes,^{3–5} including sexual and relationship dissatisfaction.^{6,7} Given their widespread occurrence, it is surprising that everyday, subclinical sexual difficulties have not received more attention in the scientific literature. Of the existing studies, most have used retrospective measures, spanning 1 or many months, which are subject to memory bias and fail to address daily or event-level phenomena. Finally, most studies have neglected the interpersonal or dyadic nature of sexual difficulties and, instead, focused on within-subject or intra-individual effects.

The current study sought to fill these gaps by examining event-level associations among sexual difficulties, the range of sexual behaviors, and sexual satisfaction in dyadic daily reports as provided by a non-clinical sample of couples. Although these objectives are potentially relevant to other populations, the focus of the present study was on the experience of low subjective sexual arousal, low genital or physiological sexual arousal, and genito-pelvic pain in newlywed, mixed-sex couples.

Sexual Difficulties and Sexual Satisfaction

A recent consensus report indicated that individuals presenting clinical levels of sexual dysfunction score lower than the general population on many physiological and relational factors, including sexual satisfaction.⁸ Although the authors caution that the presence of a sexual dysfunction does not necessarily imply sexual dissatisfaction, this association does appear to be statistically robust.⁷ Clinical levels of sexual dysfunction have also been shown to have interpersonal effects. For instance, women's experiences of genito-pelvic pain^{9–11} and men's reports of erectile difficulties¹² are both associated with their partners' lower sexual satisfaction.

Studies of subclinical sexual difficulties suggest that they too are negatively associated with sexual satisfaction in both the individuals reporting the difficulty and their partners. For example, general population surveys reported that lower levels of satisfaction with sexual function correlated with lower reported sexual happiness.¹³ However, these findings stem from single-occasion measures, and event-level associations between subclinical sexual difficulties and sexual satisfaction have not yet received empirical attention. This is an important gap, given that key variables such as sexual distress and sexual satisfaction vary significantly on a daily basis.^{14–16}

Sexual Difficulties, Sexual Behavior, and Sexual Satisfaction

A question of both conceptual and clinical relevance concerns the mechanisms by which sexual difficulties are associated with lower sexual satisfaction. Studies show that both sexual difficulties and sexual satisfaction are associated with the couple's behavior during sexual activity.⁷ Frequency and duration of sex, duration of foreplay,¹⁷ duration of post-sex affectionate exchanges,¹⁸ and of particular interest to this study, the range of sexual behaviors,¹⁹ have all been shown to correlate with greater sexual satisfaction. Conversely, cross-sectional studies have linked sexual difficulties with lower frequency of sex and lower sexual satisfaction.²⁰ Further, restrictions in the range of sexual behaviors have been reported for both men and women experiencing difficulties in sexual arousal and orgasm²¹ and for women with genito-pelvic pain.²² Hence, one plausible hypothesis is that a couple's sexual difficulties may lead to restrictions in their range of behaviors during sexual activity, which in turn may result in lower sexual satisfaction. Support for this hypothesis to date has been indirect, and dyadic, event-level associations have not yet been investigated.

Study Goals and Hypotheses

The present study examined event-level associations between subclinical sexual difficulties, the range of behaviors during sexual activity, and sexual satisfaction in newlywed couples. It was hypothesized that on days where the couple had had sexual activities: (1) reports of sexual difficulties would be associated with lower sexual satisfaction for both the respondents and their partners on the same day, and that (2) these associations would be mediated by restrictions in the range of the couple's sexual behaviors. Gender effects were also examined, but no a priori hypotheses were formulated, given that these effects have not yet been studied in the associations between sexual difficulties, sexual satisfaction, and sexual behavior. Finally, the hypotheses in this study were post-hoc.

METHODS

Participants

Working from the marriage registry of Monroe County, Indiana, USA, approximately 300 newlywed mixed-sex couples were sent a letter explaining the goals and nature of the study and were invited to contact the researchers if they were interested in participating. Interested individuals were screened for eligibility during a telephone interview. To be eligible, couples were required to be English-speaking, aged between 18 and 40 years old, childless, and intending to remain in the country for the duration of the study. These criteria allowed the study to focus on a homogeneous group of couples with subclinical sexual difficulties not associated with the transition to parenthood, perimenopause, or health issues.^{23,24}

The first 35 couples (70 participants) who proved eligible to participate took part in the study. Participants were compensated

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