

## ORIGINAL RESEARCH

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### Sex in Its Daily Relational Context

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#### ABSTRACT

**Introduction.** The present study measured the daily correlates of sexual behavior in an ecologically valid context by relying on a daily diary approach.

**Aim.** Examining the dyadic and multicomponent nature of sexual behavior is essential to create valid models of sexual responding that are better aligned with the day-to-day context of having sex in a relationship.

**Methods and Main Outcome Measures.** During 3 weeks, heterosexual couples completed, two times a day, an electronic diary to report on mood, own and perceived partner behavior, relational feelings (in the evening), sexual activity, physical intimacy, and masturbation (in the morning). This design allowed testing bidirectional temporal associations between daily context and different types of sexual behavior.

**Results.** Positive mood, displays of positive partner behavior, perceived positive partner behavior, and positive relational feelings predicted more sexual activity and intimacy in men, which then further increased their positive mood, perceived positive partner behavior, and positive feelings about the relationship on the following day. Women showed a similar pattern of predictors regarding sexual activity as men, though the effect of sexual behavior on next-day feelings and behavior was more relationship-oriented rather than affecting personal mood. Intimacy was related to almost all daily variables in women, but related only to own and perceived positive partner behavior and positive relational feelings the next day. Several partner effects also reached significance, and these were more influential in predicting male than female intimacy. Solitary sexual activity showed a different pattern of results than dyadic sexual activity, with men experiencing masturbation as negatively in the context of their relationship.

**Conclusion.** These results confirm the regulatory function of sex and intimacy in maintaining a positive relational climate and indicate that the quality of the everyday relational context is important to get partners in the mood to act in a sexual way. **Dewitte M, Van Lankveld J, Vandenberghe S, and Loeys T. Sex in its daily relational context. J Sex Med 2015;12:2436–2450.**

**Key Words.** Daily Diary; Sex; Intimacy; Masturbation; Partner Responses; Relationship; Mood

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#### Introduction

Through the years, different models have been proposed to explain sexual responding. Although valuable in itself, most of these models focus on individual processes and do not explicate the role of contextual variables. The latter is nevertheless important because sex often takes place in the context of a relationship and is thus strongly

influenced by partner responses and relational features [1–3]. Accordingly, a comprehensive theory of sexual responding needs to include information on the individual, the partner, and the relationship (for an overview on the personal, partner, and relational determinants of sexual functioning, see Dewitte [1]). To reveal the interpersonal dynamics of sexuality, sex research can benefit from the relationship literature in which several models have

been developed to define the key ingredients of qualitative and satisfying interactions between partners. Among these, intimacy models are directly relevant to the study of sexuality, ascribing an important role to perceived partner responsiveness and satisfying relationship experiences in shaping daily feelings of intimacy [4,5]. Bridging the gap between sex and relationship research creates opportunities to develop more valid models on sexual responding that take into account the multi-component, process-oriented, and dyadic nature of sexuality [1]. Such models are highly needed to get scientific research more aligned with the complex reality of having sex in the daily context of the relationship. As a first step in this endeavor, we need to identify the main components of sexual responding in daily life, using methodologies that can capture the dyadic nature of sexuality as it occurs in the natural, daily context of the relationship.

Theories and research so far did not fully consider the multidimensional, interpersonal nature of sexual experiences and are therefore limited in several important ways. First, sex research has a long tradition of studying intra-individual responses, using laboratory-based research designs or cross-sectional surveys in which sexual responses are measured at a single moment in time. Given that individual lab testing more likely reflects solitary—rather than intimate—sexual responding and the laboratory context may elicit unnatural responses, such design clearly lowers the ecological validity of sex research [6]. Also note that single-time, retrospective, cross-sectional studies are limited to simply establishing relationships between single components, and are therefore unfit to reveal the complex interrelations between sexual processes [7]. Finally, most studies on sexual behavior focus on a single outcome variable, mainly sexual frequency or sexual function. Given that sexuality can have different meanings for different people, ranging from cuddling and touching to penetration, defining sex in terms of one single sexual act limits our understanding of sexuality in daily life.

#### *The Usefulness of Dyadic Diary Research*

To create more ecologically valid and comprehensive models of sexual responding that include both individual and interpersonal variables, we relied on a daily diary methodology, which is a commonly used method in relationship research [8]. Diary methods have become increasingly popular in sex research because they allow capturing detailed

experiences in natural contexts near the time of occurrence (e.g., Birnbaum and Laser-Brandt; Pakpour et al.; Burleson et al.; Fortenberry and Hensel; Hensel et al. [2,3,9–11]). They are also particularly well suited to minimize biases due to memory or presence of the laboratory context, and to investigate temporal relations between variables in daily life [7,8]. The current study used an electronic diary to investigate (i) whether sexual behavior is related to feelings about oneself, the partner, and the relationship during the day, and (ii) whether sexual behavior on a given day can predict these variables on the following day. Whereas most studies focus on either determinants or consequences of sexuality, we considered both same-day and next-day relations. Testing both directions of the association between sexual responding and daily context is necessary to get a more complete view on the role of sexual behavior in daily life. Furthermore, by compiling various emotions and behaviors into one study design, we may better account for the richness and complexity of sexuality rather than studying single components independently of each other. To capture the dyadic nature of sexual relationships, we included the responses of both couple members and relied on advanced statistical techniques that take into account the hierarchical structure of individual responses nested within couples and the nonindependence of observations within individuals over time [12]. The Actor–Partner Interdependence Model (APIM) is one such technique that simultaneously estimates the impact of both one's own (i.e., actor effect) and partners' responses (i.e., partner effect) on the outcome variable [13].

To fully address the diversity of sexuality in daily life, we made a distinction between (i) intimate sexual acts such as cuddling, kissing, and nongenital touching, (ii) sexual acts that include penetration and genital touching, and (iii) individual sexual acts such as masturbation. Focusing on both partnered and nonpartnered sex allowed us to explore whether various manifestations of sexual behavior are experienced differently by couples in a steady relationship.

#### *Current Evidence on the Role of Mood, Partner Behavior, and Relationship Feelings in Shaping Sexual Behavior*

When reviewing extant literature on the personal and relational correlates of sexual behavior, we noticed that, despite the number of theoretical papers describing sexuality as a multidimensional construct [2], research to date has explored the

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