

Considering Attachment and Partner Perceptions in the Prediction of Physical and Emotional Sexual Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Attachment theory provides a framework for understanding sexual satisfaction; in general, research suggests that attachment anxiety and avoidance are associated with decreased sexual satisfaction. Given their different working models of self and other, perceptions of the partner's level of satisfaction might differentially influence people's own perceptions of satisfaction based on their attachment avoidance and anxiety.

Aim: To examine the predictive value of attachment anxiety and avoidance and perceptions of partner satisfaction in predicting physical and emotional satisfaction after sexual interactions in two studies.

Methods: Participants (study 1, $n = 52$; study 2, $n = 144$) completed a one-time survey containing a measurement of attachment and then reported on their physical and emotional sexual satisfaction after each sexual interaction over the course of 2 to 3 weeks.

Main Outcome Measures: The Experiences in Close Relationships Scale—Revised was completed during the one-time survey, and ratings of personal physical and emotional sexual satisfaction (studies 1 and 2) and perceptions of partner's physical and emotional satisfaction were completed after sexual interactions (study 2).

Results: Greater attachment avoidance was associated with lesser physical and emotional satisfaction. Moreover, when perceiving the partner to be emotionally satisfied, people with more attachment avoidance reported less emotional satisfaction for themselves. For greater attachment anxiety, greater perceived partner satisfaction (physical and emotional) predicted greater personal satisfaction of the two types.

Conclusion: The findings support attachment theory as a valuable lens through which to study sexual satisfaction. Moreover, the results suggest that it is important to consider perceptions of partner sexual satisfaction in understanding the sexual satisfaction of people who demonstrate attachment anxiety and avoidance.

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Key Words: Sexual Satisfaction; Attachment; Perceptions of Partner Satisfaction; Physical Satisfaction; Emotional Satisfaction

INTRODUCTION

Attachment theory is a major theory for studying and understanding interpersonal relationships. Much previous research has established the impact of attachment orientations on interpersonal interactions more generally (for extensive reviews, see Fraley and Shaver¹ and Mikulincer and Shaver²) and in sexual situations specifically,³ with research suggesting that sexual satisfaction varies as a function of attachment orientation⁴ and serves attachment-related needs.¹ The present research sought to examine satisfaction with sexual interactions through the lens of

attachment theory. Specifically, we present two studies that examined the extent to which attachment anxiety and avoidance predict physical and emotional sexual satisfaction by measuring people's real-time reaction to their sexual interactions. Moreover, sexual interactions are dynamic and interpersonal (ie, with a partner); thus, feelings of satisfaction can depend in part on perceptions of the partner's satisfaction with the interaction. To this end, this research also focused on how these perceptions influence feelings of sexual satisfaction.

Attachment

At its core, attachment theory posits that individuals hold a model of the self and a model of the other^{5,6}; these models are based on interactions with caregivers or partners. When the caregiver or partner is consistent and supportive, individuals develop a belief that they are worthy of love and attention, and that love is available from others, who can be trusted. These

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feelings often result in experiences of attachment security. Conversely, if the caregiver or partner is unresponsive, particularly in times of distress, individuals can experience attachment insecurity. Such insecurity is typically composed of two dimensions: avoidance of intimacy (attachment avoidance) and anxiety over abandonment (attachment anxiety).

People who experience more attachment anxiety tend to feel they are unworthy of love, yet they crave acceptance and positive evaluations from desirable others. They engage in behaviors aimed at maintaining proximity to close others and securing their support.² These individuals tend to be hypervigilant of cues of dissatisfaction from close others⁷ and fear abandonment and rejection from others. Conversely, individuals high in attachment avoidance tend to experience discomfort with intimacy, believing that others cannot be trusted to be consistently responsive to one's needs. They attempt to create independence and emotional distance from attachment figures.^{8,9}

Much of the previous literature has examined childhood attachment or adult romantic attachment. With respect to sexual interactions, research has focused primarily on adult romantic relationships and sexual interactions in romantic relationships (for an extensive review of the literature of sex and attachment, see Mikulincer and Shaver² and Feeney and Noller¹⁰; and for a discussion of the interconnectedness of the sexual and attachment systems, see Fraley and Shaver¹). However, sex does occur in the absence of any relationship (eg, a one-night stand) and in relationships that are not committed or romantic, and attachment orientations are likely to play a role in such sexual interactions. Thus, in the present article, we focus on adult attachment in general, that is, attachment orientations toward partners in general and not a specific partner.

Attachment and Sexual Satisfaction

Because of its problematic association with intimacy, attachment anxiety and avoidance can shape cognitions and behaviors in sexual interactions in different ways.^{11,12} Attachment anxiety and avoidance have been linked to a host of negative sexual functioning outcomes and to lower sexual satisfaction in samples composed of partnered and single people.^{4,13,14} People who experience attachment anxiety might be more likely to engage in unwanted but consensual sex and have poorer communication about sexual preferences,¹⁵ with some suggesting that these people might engage in sex out of fear of losing the partner.¹⁶ Conversely, because of their distrust of others, people with attachment avoidance tend to limit sexual intimacy by avoiding sexual interactions or by engaging in casual sex.^{17–20} In addition, they do not engage in sex to express love.¹⁶

As such, the underlying dynamics of attachment can affect feelings of satisfaction with sexual interactions. Indeed, attachment anxiety and avoidance are associated with greater dissatisfaction with sexual interactions^{21–23} and more negative affect concerning sexual experiences.^{15,24,25} In their systematic review of the literature examining attachment and sexual functioning,

Stefanou and McCabe⁴ concluded that across studies that focused on different satisfaction and functioning measurements, attachment insecurity (avoidance and anxiety) was consistently associated with decreased reports of global evaluations of sexual satisfaction across relationship types (eg, dating and married).

Most previous research has focused on global evaluations of satisfaction with sexual experiences, for instance, by asking participants how satisfied they were with their sex life.²⁶ However, sex can serve two separate functions of providing satisfaction for emotional and physical needs.^{7,22} Indeed, some (limited) research has examined these two aspects of sexual satisfaction, with some considering emotional and physical sexual satisfaction in an overall measurement of sexual satisfaction¹⁴ or as two separate constructs.^{7,27,28} When considering sexual behavior in light of attachment, people with higher feelings of anxiety and avoidance might use sex to satisfy different needs. Feelings of attachment anxiety, because of the concern with intimacy and closeness, can lead people to seek satisfaction of emotional needs through sexual interactions, whereas feelings of attachment avoidance, because of the discomfort with intimacy and closeness, can lead people to focus on the satisfaction of their physical needs. In a one-time cross-sectional survey, Davis et al⁷ found that avoidant and anxious attachments were associated with less satisfaction. Specifically, anxiety was negatively associated with emotional satisfaction, whereas avoidance was negatively associated with physical satisfaction, findings that were true for single people and those in relationships. However, Davis et al⁷ examined only global reports of sexual satisfaction and did not look at satisfaction in response to real-time events.

Attachment and Partner Perceptions

Sexual interactions are inherently interpersonal, and perceptions of the partner's level of satisfaction can influence people's own perceptions of satisfaction.²⁹ Indeed, previous research has demonstrated the importance of partner perceptions more generally^{30,31} and in attachment specifically^{32,33} for intrapersonal and interpersonal outcomes. Despite little previous research, Fallis et al²⁹ found that people who perceived greater sexual satisfaction in their partner tended to report greater sexual satisfaction. Perceptions of partner satisfaction can be of special importance to attachment anxiety and avoidance. Attachment anxiety fosters hypervigilance to threat-related cues from the partner^{34,35} and can lead people to use sex as a barometer for the quality of the relationship.⁷ In other words, perceiving that their sexual partner is dissatisfied can represent threatening information that indicates potential rejection from the partner. In response to such perceptions, these people might experience less personal satisfaction with the interaction. This might particularly be the case for the emotional aspect of the sexual interaction, because these people might use sex to meet emotional needs rather than physical needs.²² Conversely, avoidance is associated with discomfort with intimacy and interpersonal dependence. For these individuals, perceiving that the partner is sexually dissatisfied might not relate to their own level of sexual

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