

“Macho” Beliefs Moderate the Association Between Negative Sexual Episodes and Activation of Incompetence Schemas in Sexual Context, in Gay and Heterosexual Men

Maria Manuela Peixoto, PhD,¹ and Pedro Nobre, PhD²

ABSTRACT

Background: Despite the existence of conceptual models of sexual dysfunction based on cognitive theory, few studies have tested the role of vulnerability factors such as sexual beliefs as moderators of the activation of cognitive schemas in response to negative sexual events.

Aim: To test the moderator role of dysfunctional sexual beliefs in the association between the frequency of negative sexual episodes and the activation of incompetence schemas in gay and heterosexual men.

Methods: Five-hundred seventy-five men (287 gay, 288 heterosexual) who completed an online survey on cognitive-affective dimensions and sexual functioning were selected from a larger database. Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to test the hypothesis that dysfunctional sexual beliefs moderate the association between the frequency of unsuccessful sexual episodes and the activation of incompetence schemas.

Outcome: Participants completed the Sexual Dysfunctional Beliefs Questionnaire and the Questionnaire of Cognitive Schemas Activated in Sexual Context.

Results: Findings indicated that men’s ability for always being ready for sex, to satisfy the partner, and to maintain an erection until ending sexual activity constitute “macho” beliefs that moderate the activation of incompetence schemas when unsuccessful sexual events occur in gay and heterosexual men. In addition, activation of incompetence schemas in response to negative sexual events in gay men was moderated by the endorsement of conservative attitudes toward moderate sexuality.

Clinical Implications: The main findings suggested that psychological interventions targeting dysfunctional sexual beliefs could help de-catastrophize the consequences of negative sexual events and facilitate sexual functioning.

Strengths and Limitations: Despite being a web-based study, it represents the first attempt to test the moderator role of dysfunctional sexual beliefs in the association between the frequency of unsuccessful sexual episodes and the activation of incompetence schemas in gay and heterosexual men.

Conclusion: Overall, findings support the role of sexual beliefs as facilitators of the activation of incompetence schemas in the face of negative sexual events in gay and heterosexual men, emphasizing the need to develop treatment and prevention strategies aimed at challenging common male beliefs about sexuality. **Peixoto MM, Nobre P. “Macho” Beliefs Moderate the Association Between Negative Sexual Episodes and Activation of Incompetence Schemas in Sexual Context, in Gay and Heterosexual Men. J Sex Med 2017;XX:XXX–XXX.**

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Key Words: Cognitive Schemas; Dysfunctional Sexual Beliefs; Gay Men; Heterosexual Men; Negative Sexual Episodes

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¹Research Center for Psychology, School of Psychology, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal;

²Faculty of Psychology and Education Science, Center for Psychology, University of Porto, Porto, Portugal

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INTRODUCTION

The role of cognitive dimensions as vulnerability factors for the development of male sexual dysfunctions was first described by Barlow¹ in his cognitive-affective model. Barlow suggested that men with sexual dysfunction are prone to present conservative or unrealistic and demanding beliefs about sexuality, which make them more vulnerable to develop negative self-interpretations (schemas) whenever these demanding standards

are not met or the sexual episode conflicts with the conservative view of one's sexuality.^{2,3} Beliefs about sexuality are influenced by one's cultural, social, religious, and educational background. Restrictive sexual beliefs arise from a religious-based education and culture, whereas social expectations on sexual performance promote demanding and unrealistic sexual beliefs.^{4–8} Cognitive schemas are core conceptualizations about the self that guide human behavior and assign meaning to experiences.⁹ More recently, Nobre¹⁰ developed a cognitive-emotional model of sexual dysfunction in men and women that emphasizes the role of sexual beliefs as vulnerability factors for the development of sexual difficulties. According to this model, demanding and unrealistic beliefs about men's sexual performance (also addressed as "macho" beliefs) would set a highly demanding standard that make men more vulnerable to develop catastrophizing interpretations of a sexual event whenever these standards are not met.

Research on dysfunctional sexual beliefs arises from clinical work with couples facing sexual dysfunction. Hawton⁴ and Zilbergeld⁸ listed many sexual myths that were common in men and couples with sexual dysfunctions such as beliefs regarding sexual scripts (eg, "All touching is sexual or should lead to sex"; "Men should not express their feelings") and to highly demanding standards related to sexual performance (eg, "A real man performs during sex"). According to a pioneer study conducted by Baker and De Silva,¹¹ sexually dysfunctional men endorsed significantly more sexual myths compared with a control group of men without sexual difficulties. More recently, Nobre et al¹² developed a scale to assess the presence of dysfunctional sexual beliefs. Findings from a study comparing heterosexual men with and without sexual dysfunction showed that beliefs about women's sexual satisfaction and their reaction to men's failure and beliefs related to excessive sexual performance demands were more frequent in men with sexual dysfunction.^{13,14} In addition, heterosexual men with lack of sexual desire more frequently reported restrictive attitudes toward sexuality,¹⁵ whereas heterosexual men with erectile disorder more often reported beliefs related to the primacy of coitus and to the demands regarding women's sexual satisfaction and macho beliefs.^{15,16}

Despite the accumulated evidence in heterosexual samples, research on the sexual beliefs of gay men is scarce. A recent study based on two case studies suggested that in addition to demanding performance beliefs identical to heterosexual beliefs, gay men with erectile disorder reported sexual beliefs associated with sex labels (eg, "A 'good top' is always erect during sexual encounters").¹⁷ Another study conducted with gay men with and without distressing sexual problems reported that erroneous beliefs about a partner's sexual satisfaction, beliefs of sex as an abuse of men's power, and conservative beliefs were more frequent in sexually dysfunctional gay men.¹⁸

In addition to sexual beliefs, recent studies have focused on the role of cognitive schemas and in particular on the activation of

negative self-schemas in response to negative sexual events. Nobre and Pinto-Gouveia¹⁹ developed the Questionnaire of Cognitive Schemas Activated in Sexual Context (QCSASC) to assess cognitive schemas activated when an unsuccessful sexual episode occurs. The domains assessed by the QCSASC are incompetence schemas (eg, "I am incompetent"), undesirability-rejection schemas (eg, "I am defective—others don't love me"), difference-loneliness schemas (eg, "I am lonely"), self-depreciation schemas (eg, "I am unworthy"), and helpless schemas (eg, "I am needy").

Studies conducted using this instrument have shown that negative cognitive schemas activated in the sexual context appear to play a significant role in male sexual dysfunction, specifically incompetence schemas.^{20–22} In a study conducted by Quinta-Gomes and Nobre,²² heterosexual men with sexual dysfunction activated more incompetence, difference-loneliness, and helpless schemas in response to unsuccessful sexual episodes. Similar research with heterosexual and gay men showed that gay men with distressing sexual symptoms activated more undesirability-rejection and self-depreciation schemas, whereas heterosexual men with distressing sexual symptoms activated more incompetence, difference-loneliness, undesirability-rejection, self-depreciation, and helpless schemas when unsuccessful sexual events occurred.²¹

The activation of incompetence schemas is not only dependent on unsuccessful sexual episodes frequency. Based on the cognitive-emotional model for sexual dysfunction,¹⁰ men with a cognitive profile characterized by dysfunctional sexual beliefs, namely macho beliefs, conservative beliefs, and demands regarding women's sexual satisfaction,^{15,16} could be at higher risk to activate more incompetence schemas in response to negative sexual episodes. Therefore, this study assessed the moderator role of dysfunctional sexual beliefs (sexual conservatism, macho beliefs, beliefs about a partner's sexual satisfaction, restrictive attitudes toward sex, sex as an abuse of men's sexual power, and partner's sexual power) in the association between the frequency of unsuccessful sexual episodes and the activation of incompetence schemas in a sample of heterosexual men and a sample of gay men.

METHODS

Participants and Procedures

This study is part of a larger project on cognitive-affective dimensions and sexual functioning in heterosexuals, gay men, and lesbian women, which was publicized on social networks (eg, Facebook) and through mailing lists (eg, universities; lesbian, gay bisexual, and transgender associations; and sexology-related societies). Participants completed an online survey from May 2012 to 2013 and were invited to select one of two links: "heterosexual men" or "gay men." After reading and agreeing with the informed consent, participants were invited to answer several questions about sexual functioning and cognitive

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