

Running head: SEXUAL SATISFACTION AND RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

Relationship Between Sexual Satisfaction and Relationship Satisfaction Based on Equity

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Abstract

This study examined the relationship between an individual's feeling of sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction. The study focused on equity and sexual satisfaction as predictors of relationship satisfaction. Research has shown that communication and acceptance are also important factors affecting overall relationship satisfaction. Our sample was based off of a larger sample conducted from the National Survey of Families and Households. The sample included in the study consisted of 13,007 respondents. Consistent with previous research our results showed that there was a significant relationship between equity, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction. Since sexual satisfaction is a strong predictor of one's overall relationship satisfaction, it shows that being sexually satisfied in a relationship is a vital factor.

Relationship Between Sexual Satisfaction and Relationship Satisfaction Based on Equity

Sexual satisfaction has been found to be a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction (Fricker, 2002 & Byers, 2005). In fact, some studies have even considered sexual satisfaction to be an indicator of overall relationship satisfaction (Sprecher, Cate, Harvey, Wenzel, & Sprecher, 2004). Relationship satisfaction has been found to increase in couples that have equal levels of sexual desire and sexual activity (Santtila et al., 2008). However, there is evidence to support that males are more likely to report dissatisfaction with their relationship if there is an immense difference between their sexual desire and their sexual activity (Santtila et al., 2008). Some research examined a variety of couple types, including cohabitating, dating, and married; whereas other studies solely focused on one specific couple type, such as married, within the population sample. Yet, regardless of the couple type used, most studies found a positive relationship between sexual and relationship satisfaction (Sprecher et al., 2004). This could be because the relationship between sexual and relationship satisfaction is bidirectional, meaning the association is interchangeable (Byers).

Relationship Satisfaction

The components that affect relationship satisfaction have long been a question among researchers. Past research has claimed that there are numerous factors that contribute to overall relationship satisfaction. The main component this study focuses on is that equity is a significant factor in predicting relationship satisfaction. Previous research has also stated that communication and acceptance are influential aspects to a satisfying relationship. Communication has been stated as the “key” component to a successful relationship (Troy, 2000). Poor communication such as having unresolved conflicts and emotional distance can result in one not feeling loved which in turn, decreases relationship satisfaction (Byers, 2005).

The notion that good communication is related to satisfying relationships is widely accepted (Fletcher, 2002). Fletcher found that couples who communicate report higher rates of relationship satisfaction.

In romantic relationships, acceptance has also been proposed as one of the key factors in preventing dissatisfaction in the relationship (Doss & Christensen, 2006). Acceptance is receiving what is offered with approval or submission. Acceptance between partners relies on sacrifices between each partner because it is an ability to recognize and evaluate characteristics of your partner, embracing the positives and negotiating the negatives. Acceptance of the other person in a romantic relationship means that if the other person has a characteristic flaw, or some type of negative aspect or behavior, the partner will be understanding and not hold it against them. Acceptance of the other person in the relationship is shown to help prevent satisfaction from decreasing, but does not show that satisfaction will increase. Acceptance increases the likelihood that previously intolerable events seem less problematic, and can even be beneficial to the relationship.

Acceptance within a relationship may benefit overall satisfaction. However, the question of how one finds acceptance within their relationship remains. Though much literature presents the idea of problem solving skills as a means of bettering one's relationship, Bradbury and colleagues (Bradbury et al., 2000; Karney & Bradbury, 1995) replaced this concept with a different approach in which one relies not on problem solving skills, but adaptive behaviors. These adapted behaviors are defined in a way in which partners negotiate their differences. Many couples face several stressful and challenging events in which they must adapt to or compromise. These adaptive behaviors include communication and conflict management, interspousal support, emotional closeness and intimacy, and sensuality and sexuality (Lawrence

et al. 2008). Lawrence et al. (2008) study suggests that adaptive behaviors with these disagreements justify the use of acceptance, resulting in greater satisfaction. In 1997, Christensen developed the Frequency and Acceptability of Partner Behavior Inventory (FABPI). This inventory used to determine the frequency and acceptability of positive and negative behaviors. Figure 1 shows the positive and negative attributes measured by the FABPI. Findings suggest that men are slightly more likely to be more accepting than women, whether they were married or living together.

Sexual Satisfaction

Couples with higher sexual satisfaction have been found to be more satisfied in their overall relationship (Fletcher, 2002). There are several theories about sexual satisfaction; however, the current focus will be based on a social-based perspective (Sprecher et al., 2004). Social-based theories state that the normalities that most interpersonal relationships have in common are present because society has guided norms about interpersonal relationship characteristics, for example, individuals are socially expected to date, marry, and then have children in that specific order (Sprecher et al., 2004). According to symbolic interaction, one's "self" is as important as their perception of their sexual partner (Sprecher et al. p.238, 2004). As past research has shown, when one's perception of oneself as a sexual partner is positive, then the overall sexual satisfaction is also boosted (Sprecher et al., 2004).

To help achieve sexual satisfaction, good communication about sexual desires and preferences helps partners in negotiating a mutually and maximally enjoyable sexual script (Byers & Demmons, 1999). In addition, partners that listen and are responsive to their partner are more sexually satisfied themselves (Peck, 2004). Poor communication such as having unresolved conflicts and emotional distance can result in one not feeling loved which in turn,

decreases both relationship and sexual satisfaction (Byers, 2005). Therefore, good communication about sexual aspects in the relationship is not only needed to be sexually satisfied; good communication about nonsexual aspects is needed as well. It has been shown that with marital therapy that focused communication on nonsexual aspects in a couple's relationship, they showed an increase in overall sexual satisfaction (Sprecher et al. 2004).

Butzer and Campbell (2008) found that higher levels of sexual satisfaction were linked to overall higher levels of relationship stability and quality. Their research showed that sexuality was a key component of relationship satisfaction. It should be mentioned, however, that not everyone who reports satisfaction in the relationship also reports sexual satisfaction. The link between the two suggests an increased need for further research. Couples who make an effort to increase overall relationship closeness and help each other deal with stress by engaging in sexual activity report higher levels of strength in daily sexual experiences, and it seems to help with some of the other aspects of relationships (Butzer & Campbell, 2008).

Equity

It has been argued that sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction are associated with theories based on social exchange. (Sprecher, 2002). Equity Theory, which is the idea that both individuals in a relationship are equally satisfied, has been found to be a predictor of relationship satisfaction (Sprecher, Cate, Harvey, Wenzel, & Sprecher, 2004). When a couple has an equitable relationship, both individuals feel they are receiving as much as they are contributing to their relationship (Sprecher, 2001). Equity theorists also use terms such as underbenefited inequity, which is when an individual contributes more but receives less and overbenefited inequity, which is when an individual contributes less but receives more, to predict relationship satisfaction (Sprecher, 2001). Both forms of inequity have been found to contribute to

relationship dissatisfaction, but underbenefiting inequality was found to be the most distressful (Sprecher, 2001). One longitudinal study found that only wives reported significant inequity issues and an increase in conflict following the birth of their first child (Sprecher, 2001).

Social exchange theories suggest that the more equity there is in a relationship and among sexual behaviors, the more satisfied individuals will be with their relationship (Sprecher, 2002). Social exchange theorists have also used the investment model to help determine the rewards and costs of relationships (Sprecher et al., 2004). Rewards have been defined as “exchanged resources that are pleasurable and gratifying”, and costs as “exchanged resources that result in a loss of punishment” (Sprecher, p. 198, 1998). The investment model derives from the notion that everyone has their own standards of what he or she believes he or she deserves from a partner. Relationship satisfaction is argued to be highest when there are more rewards and less costs (Sprecher et al., 2004). Individual’s standards or opinions of what they deserve come from preceding relationships and experiences (Sprecher et al., 2004). Balancing out the rewards and costs in the relationship results in more satisfying sexual activities in both partners which results in increased sexual satisfaction (MacNeil & Byers, 2005). The hypothesis that overall relationship satisfaction is significantly related to sexual satisfaction and feelings of equity within a relationship will be explored in this study.

Methods

Participants

Data within this research included 13,007 respondents from a larger sample of 33,869 collected from the National Survey of Families and Households. The sample was selected from the National Survey of Families and Households based on relevant items to the current study. Participants’ ages ranged from 16-98 years of age with a standard deviation of 17.426 and a