

AN INVESTIGATION OF ROMANTIC AND SEXUAL SATISFACTION WITHIN
GAY, STRAIGHT, AND LESBIAN COUPLES

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PREVIEW

Gregory James Simons, Jr, M.S.

Abstract

An investigation of romantic and sexual satisfaction
within gay, straight, and lesbian couples

One hundred thirty-seven non-married couples (46 male-male, 46 female-female, and 45 male-female) involved in relationships six months or less participated in a longitudinal study of behavior within romantic relationships. Qualitative methods were primarily used to collect participants' narratives about special, frustrating, beneficial, and concerning aspects of their relationships as well as two specific components of satisfaction, relationship and sexual. Grounded theory was used to develop coding categories from participants' narratives. The coding categories were used to quantify data to allow analysis by T-tests, ANOVAs, correlations, and regressions. Differences and similarities between men and women, and among couple types, were examined, however, similarities outweighed differences. Relationship satisfaction was related to the total reported relationship benefits, having more positive relationship aspects than negative aspects, and a partner's use of substances. Sexual satisfaction was related to differences between themselves and their partner being complementary, thinking of their significant others as a potential long-term partner, communication problems, and partner substance use. Relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, partner long-term potential, total positive relationship traits, similarities, and complementary differences were all higher in couples together at the six-month follow-up than in those who had broken up.

An investigation of romantic and sexual satisfaction
within gay, straight, and lesbian couples

The term satisfaction refers to the pleasure or contentment accompanying the fulfillment of a person's needs, desires, or requirements in a specified area (Neufeldt & Sparks, 1995). When researching the satisfaction people experience in specific situations, information beyond the level of satisfaction the person feels is needed. It is necessary to discover what the requirements for the situation were, that now, having either been met or not, contribute to the satisfaction the person is reporting. This is especially relevant in the realm of romantic relationships, in which a person's level of satisfaction greatly contributes to decision making about maintaining or ending the relationship.

Developing and deriving satisfaction from romantic relationships can be a complex process. Each member of a couple brings individual characteristics and expectations to the new relationship. Each partner's satisfaction is contingent on these expectations being met by the other person. As a relationship develops, each member's personal characteristics interact with those of the other, creating qualities unique to that partnership. These interactions and qualities can enhance or reduce the satisfaction each partner experiences as a member of the couple. Research has attempted to identify qualities that help or hinder relationship development, and scholars have studied whether differences exist in satisfying/unsatisfying characteristics related to an individual's sex and/or sexual orientation.

The purpose of this study is to build upon previous research investigating people's satisfaction with romantic and sexual relationships. Currently, a useful way to examine sex, gender-mode, sexual orientation, and romantic relationship and sexual satisfaction is to incorporate the qualitative methods of grounded theory with dyad statistics. Past research in this area has consistently supplied participants with qualities to rate and consider when asking about satisfaction and partner characteristics (for example, Buss, 1989a, Regan & Sprecher, 1995). Participants rate these values, and statistical methods reveal that when given values, men rate some higher than women and vice versa.

By allowing participants to generate characteristics on their own, rather than providing values to them, this study will examine if women and men differ on the qualities they mention when asked open-ended questions about their relationships. This can directly address whether the value differences found between men and women are artifacts of the way data is gathered. Differences between the sexes may not surface when participants are not provided with pre-generated lists to rate. A qualitative research approach can be used to avoid prompting participants or using qualities predetermined by researchers, while still gathering information about the characteristics participants report as satisfying. This area of research is also in need of theory construction. In addition to qualitative methods, couple-centered methods, such as dyad statistics, can lead to advancement in providing data to fill theoretical gaps.

Dyad statistics are important because they allow for the comparison of data from partner one to that of partner two (each a member of the same couple),

and the data from partner two to that of partner one. When data is gathered about each person, comparisons can be made of the perceptions of each member of the couple. Data about interaction effects between partners is also provided. Dyad statistics also allow the couple as a unit to be compared to other couples. Because the data to be used in this study included equal numbers of female-male, male-male, and female-female couples, comparisons can be made between men and women and across each couple type.

One way to accomplish a qualitative study which allows for the use of dyad statistics is to collect narratives from each individual member of a couple through semi-structured interviews. For this study, participants were asked open-ended questions about what is special and what frustrates them about their partner, in addition to what qualities make the relationship work and what qualities need to be improved in the relationship. Participants were also asked about benefits from involvement in the relationship and concerns they have about the relationship. These questions allowed the participants to self-generate qualities and characteristics they saw as positive and negative in their current relationship. Other important narratives that were obtained include how satisfied the person was in their current romantic relationship, and how satisfied they were with the sexual components of the relationship, followed up by questions about how to improve the relationship to increase sexual satisfaction.

The first step of this project was to examine existing research and theory in the areas of romantic relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and the relationship between the two. In beginning this exploration, a foundation of

knowledge about relationship and sexual satisfaction will be delineated. Next, research and theories about the contributions of sex, gender, and sexual orientation to satisfaction will be described. Theories that attempt to explain these contributions make up the next level of investigation, followed by the best methods for collecting and analyzing information about relationships in romantic dyads.

Before discussing research findings regarding experiences of romantic relationship satisfaction and the influencing characteristics, it is important to address the difference between the terms *sex* and *gender*. In psychology, *sex* refers to a person's biological make-up (chromosomes, hormones, and genitalia). Humans most often fall into one of two sexes, male or female, although there are also a variety of rarer, intersexed possibilities. Whereas *sex* refers only to biological differences, *gender* includes the social constructions derived from biological differences. Gender terms (masculinity and femininity) reflect socially constructed views of men and women's behavior (Wood, 1996). Unfortunately, the terms *sex* and *gender* are often used interchangeably, even in academic research, making it important to attend to how these terms are defined for the purposes of a particular study, independent of which term is used.

Gender roles are characteristics, interests, and behavior, defined by society as appropriate for members of each sex (Moore, Kennedy, Furlonger, & Evers, 1999). Gender role socialization is the process by which internalized attitudes, behaviors, and values associated with masculinity and femininity are acquired (Shepard, 2001). It is believed that through social interactions (with

parents, peers, teachers, and so on) people learn the characteristics that are viewed as appropriate for men and women to possess. Western society teaches men that they should be assertive, aggressive, ambitious, confident, athletic, competitive, dominant, self-reliant, and willing to take risks, while women are expected to be affectionate, compassionate, gentle, loyal, tender, understanding, nurturing, dependent, and co-operative (Bem, 1974; Bem, 1981). Although gender traits were once thought of as mutually exclusive, femininity and masculinity are no longer measured as opposite poles of a single continuum. Current research measures them as orthogonal dimensions, allowing a person to score high, low, or moderate in both masculinity and femininity.

Romantic Relationship Satisfaction

People are most likely to stay in relationships when the interactions with their partner are pleasant and happy, rather than distressful and hostile (Canary & Stafford, 1994; Gottman, 1993). It is important to understand the components that contribute to a person's level of relationship satisfaction, not only to predict relationship stability, but also to help unsatisfied couples make decisions about their relationships. Some individual characteristics seem to enhance satisfaction, while others have been shown to reduce a person's reported satisfaction with their romantic relationship. Researchers have identified various attributes that increase the satisfaction experienced in a relationship.

Because relationships are complicated, relationship research is necessarily complicated. Before moving into a discussion of the interactions between relationship satisfaction and other traits such as a person's sex or

sexual orientation, a basic understanding of general relationship satisfaction is helpful. There are areas of research that have laid out specific behaviors and styles that contribute to satisfying relationships. Characteristics such as open, honest, and direct communication, respect for a partner's boundaries, showing physical affection, having emotionally close and spontaneous sex, having empathy, and lacking defensiveness have all been identified as qualities that contribute to a satisfying relationship (Firestone & Catlett, 1999). A few theories have been proposed to organize and understand the traits and behaviors a person has that seem to contribute to the quality of their relationships. Two that will be briefly mentioned here are love styles theory and attachment theory.

“Love styles” is one concept that researchers have introduced to understand the different ways people behave in romantic relationships. A love style is the way a person tends to interact with their partner. Six different love styles (Eros, Ludus, Storge, Mania, Pragma, and Agape) can be used to describe the different ways people define and approach love, which in turn guide their attitudes regarding love and their behavior toward those they love (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986). The Eros love style involves a need for intense physical and emotional attraction and a high level of commitment. Ludus is a game playing love style in which rules only known to one member of the dyad govern behavior and that member displays a low level of commitment to their partner. Storge is an affectionate love slowly developing from friendship. Mania is a highly volatile and obsessional love style. Pragma is an undemonstrative love driven by the head. Agape is an intense and friendly love with high altruism.

Eros, Agape, and Ludus have been shown to relate to relationship satisfaction, whereas Storge, Mania, and Pragma have not significantly affected satisfaction in research. Relationship satisfaction is higher for people who score high on Eros and Agape, and lower for those scoring high on Ludus (Frazier & Esterly, 1990; Fricker & Moore, 2002). Those high in Eros and Agape may employ relationship-nurturing behaviors that increase the quality of a relationship. Eros was found to be the strongest predictor of relationship satisfaction for both men and women, whereas Agape was only a predictor of satisfaction for women (Contreres, Hendrick, & Hendrick, 1996). The Ludus love style may discourage intimacy in relationships (Morrow, Clark, & Brock, 1995), thus decreasing satisfaction.

The second theory used to understand how a person's behavior affects relationship satisfaction concerns attachment styles. Attachment styles represent the ways people connect with others through trust and communication. These styles seem to be based on early relationships with parents. Attachment styles are internal working models based on these early interactions with primary care-givers, and a child can develop secure or insecure attachments. Secure attachment involves high levels of self-worth and trust toward others, whereas insecure attachment involves high levels of anxiety about relationships and avoidance of intimacy. Greater levels of relationship satisfaction were found for people who scored as securely attached, while those with insecure attachment styles scored significantly lower on levels of relationship satisfaction (Keelan, Dion, & Dion, 1994).

Overall, those who experience emotional and physical attraction for their partner, feelings of love and altruism, trust, open communication, and respect also report high levels of relationship satisfaction. This constellation of satisfying components is quite general, suggesting that a concept such as romantic relationship satisfaction is also general. To identify more specific aspects of satisfaction, one must choose a specific area of relationship satisfaction to explore. There are many, more specific, areas such as satisfaction with communication, conflict resolution, time spent together, and division of labor. Sexual satisfaction is another specific area that has been extensively researched, and it is the area that will be focused on for this study because sexual behaviors are often core components of romantic relationship satisfaction.

Sexual Satisfaction

There has been an increase in research focused on sexuality within the context of relationships (Christopher & Sprecher, 2000). Sexual satisfaction, in and of itself, can involve the same interplay of individual characteristics and interactions as general relationship satisfaction, but there is not complete overlap in components contributing to relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction. In addition, researchers have explored potential relationships between satisfaction with the relationship and satisfaction with sex. Levels of relationship and sexual satisfaction have readily observable consequences for relationships, such as decisions about the maintenance or dissolution of the relationship, extra-dyadic affairs, sexual dysfunction, and entering couples therapy. As was done above with romantic relationship satisfaction, the basic components contributing to

sexual satisfaction will be briefly mentioned before discussing more complex relationship interactions.

Most couples report that they are satisfied with the sexual aspects of their relationships (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983; Edwards & Booth, 1994; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994). When asked what qualities of the sexual relationship provide them with satisfaction, people report traits such as the frequency of sexual activities (Greeley, 1991; Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994; Sprecher & McKinney, 1993), the ability to communicate about sexuality, feeling emotionally involved, being interested in sex, an absence of sexual dysfunction (Wyatt & Lyons-Rowe, 1990), engaging in oral-genital sex, experimenting with love-making, and having orgasms (Sprecher & McKinney, 1993). Various individual factors also contribute to sexual satisfaction. These include being younger, being sexually unreserved, having experienced a non-religious childhood, having had an early start to their sexual life, reaching a higher level of education, having liberal sexual attitudes, being sexually assertive, and assigning higher importance to their sexual life (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997).

Research has also found that sexual satisfaction is related to relationship components such as reciprocal love (Aron & Henkemeyer, 1995; Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Sprecher & Regan, 1998), sexual communication (Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Henderson-King & Veroff, 1994), relationship equity (Henderson-King & Veroff, 1994), and the perceived likelihood the relationship will last (Sprecher, Metts, Burleson, Hatfield, & Thompson, 1995; Waite & Joyner,

2001). Monogamy has been shown to increase levels of sexual satisfaction (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997), as have personal feelings of control and empowerment (Sprecher & McKinney, 1993). Of the aforementioned love styles, Eros and Ludus were the only significant predictors of sexual satisfaction, with high reported levels of Eros predicting higher levels of sexual satisfaction and high reported levels of Ludus predicting lower levels of sexual satisfaction (Fricker & Moore, 2002).

Sexual satisfaction, like many relationship characteristics, is not static. Even when people feel a moderate to high level of satisfaction with their relationships they can usually identify something they would like more or less of from their partner (Hatfield, Sprecher, Pillemer, Greenberger, & Wexler, 1988). This suggests that satisfaction may not ever reach a consistent plateau, but may ebb and wane cyclically over the course of a relationship. Baumeister, Catanese, and Vohs (2002) found that often partners' sexual wishes and feelings are out of synchrony. The arguments and sexual conflicts that develop can lead to decreases in satisfaction. Decreases in sexual satisfaction over time have been shown to be associated with increased likelihood of divorce (Edwards & Booth, 1994). There may also be a trend for sexual satisfaction to naturally decrease over time (Sprecher, 2002). Decreases in sexual activity and interest were shown to begin in the first two years of marriage (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991), and the duration of a relationship has been shown to have a small, negative effect on the quality of marital sex (Liu, 2003). Sexuality, and a person's

satisfaction with it, may change with time and familiarity, making sexual satisfaction a complex process with no identifiable plateau.

This most basic level of analyzing romantic relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction merely isolates attributes that have been shown to contribute to a person's satisfaction in a relationship. Recognition of such individual attributes, although necessary for understanding, does not provide much useful information about individual differences, interactions, or directions of effects. With those individual traits in mind that were important in couples' satisfaction, more complex dynamics can now be explored. The first of these is the interaction between sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction.

Relationship and Sexual Satisfaction

An important potential interaction when studying the satisfaction of partners in romantic relationships is whether or not relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction affect one another. Past research has found relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction to be positively correlated (Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Donahey & Carroll, 1993; Edwards & Booth, 1994; Henderson-King & Veroff, 1994; McCabe & Cobain, 1998; Sprecher, 2002). This finding has been found for married couples (Henderson-King & Veroff, 1994) and couples in new dating relationships (Byers, Demmons, & Lawrance, 1998; Davies, Katz, & Jackson, 1999). However, there is more to the relationship connecting two variables than the association between them. It is also important to know how much the variables affect one another and if one variable predicts the other or if

changes in levels of satisfaction result from a third variable that affects both types of satisfaction.

Sprecher (2002) examined measures of sexual satisfaction and relationship quality in a longitudinal study of premarital couples. Couples in her study completed a questionnaire at baseline, and follow-up questionnaires one, two, three, and four years post-baseline. She found that sexual satisfaction was positively correlated with relationship satisfaction, love, and commitment at all five follow-ups in the study. Changes in sexual satisfaction were not related to changes in relationship quality at follow-ups for women; however, changes were related for men. Data did not support the contention that sexual satisfaction leads to changes in relationship quality or vice versa, although the two were correlated at the baseline and follow-ups (mean correlation of all measurement times; $r = .45$). This study suggests two things: first, that the relationship between sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction is different for men and women, and second, that other variables may be responsible for co-changes in relationship and sexual satisfaction.

McCabe (1999) found that intimacy and sexual communication were two other variables that influenced the relationship between sexual and relationship satisfaction. Non-sexual forms of intimacy such as expressed affection (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991) and supportive communication (Sprecher, Metts, Burleson, Hatfield, & Thompson, 1995) may be better predictors of relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction than trying to predict one from the other. Other characteristics that may affect relationship and sexual satisfaction are sex and

gender. As stated previously, because men and women may experience satisfaction differently, it is important to explore in more depth differences that may result from a person's sex.

Sex, Gender, and Satisfaction

Gender and Sex

Gender and sex seem to play important roles in a person's experience of romantic relationships and sexual satisfaction. Men and women may experience different levels of satisfaction and different interactions between relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction; moreover, they may derive satisfaction from different partner and relationship qualities. Again, it is important to remember that sex and gender are different. It is true that men are taught masculine gender role traits and women feminine gender role traits, but both men and women can possess traits stereotypically associated with the other gender role.

A few studies have directly addressed this issue when exploring relationship satisfaction. A person's sex was found to have no effect on feelings about self-reported love behaviors, but a person's gender typing (as assessed by the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI; Bem, 1974)) had a large effect (Coleman & Ganong, 1985). When biological sex has been directly compared to gender, it is gender, and not biological sex, that seems to determine more satisfying relationships (Steiner-Pappalardo & Gurung, 2002). Most researchers, however, compare men to women, and find differences without directly testing gender.

When directly measuring gender, high levels of feminine traits have been found to predict relationship health (Baucom & Aiken, 1984). Moore, Kennedy,

Furlonger, and Evers (1999) found that individuals with higher traditionally feminine characteristics were more romantic, regardless of sex. Participants who score high on stereotypic masculinity are still romantic if they also score high on stereotypic femininity (Moore et al, 1999). In other words, either femininity or androgyny may be associated with a romantic orientation.

Stereotypic femininity is often conceptualized as being relationally oriented (Wood, 1993), because many of the traits that increase relationship satisfaction are traits women are more often taught to express, such as affection and understanding. In essence, women have been socialized to be more empathic than men (Weitzman, 1984). Stereotypic masculinity, on the other hand, has been found to relate to more difficulty with intimacy (Fischer & Good, 1997). Characteristics of stereotypic masculinity that may cause this difficulty are the shame some men experience from expressing tender emotions; feeling emotionally absent and avoiding emotional expression; or a fear that any affectionate emotional expression will be associated with femininity or homosexuality, two things men are often taught to avoid (Gratch, 2001). One of the few emotions men are stereotypically allowed to display is anger (Shields, 2002). These stereotypic masculine and feminine characteristics can have various affects on an individual's romantic relationship satisfaction.

When discussing relationship satisfaction it is important to clarify how feminine and masculine traits affect each partner. When stating that feminine characteristics are related to satisfaction, this does not simply mean that being stereotypically feminine or biologically female is likely to increase one's

relationship satisfaction. On the contrary, in the early stages of relationships, women have lower satisfaction than men (Blair, 1993). Feminine characteristics seem to increase satisfaction for the partner of the person with feminine traits, not the person with the traits her or himself. Regardless of sex, individuals reporting stereotypically feminine characteristics such as interpersonal sensitivity, understanding of others, and loyalty have partners reporting higher levels of satisfaction (Bradbury & Fincham, 1988).

Relationship Satisfaction

Sex and gender may relate to relationship satisfaction through the qualities that men and women look for in a potential mate. For the most part, women and men have been found to be quite similar on the traits they look for in potential partners. Buss (1989a) conducted a study of 37 countries in which he asked men and women to rank the traits most looked for in a potential partner. He found that both men and women ranked mutual attraction-love, dependable character, emotional stability and maturity, and pleasing disposition as their top four traits. Men and women were equal in their desire for mates who are kind, intelligent, dependable, and healthy (Buss, 1989a). The only difference in traits found by Buss was that women, more so than men, preferred mates who were expressive and ambitious while men preferred attractive mates more than women did.

More recently, Regan and Sprecher (1995) asked women and men about the value they placed on various qualities in their partners. They found that women valued warmth, understanding, and good communication in a partner

more than men did. Overall, women attached more value to expressiveness, getting along with friends and family, and social status (like high paying jobs). The only partner characteristic men valued more than women was physical attractiveness, a finding comparable to what occurred in Buss's (1989a) study. In addition to financial security, women seem to prefer partners with good communication skills, emotional availability, and the ability to interact easily with the woman's social network.

Sexual Satisfaction

Men and women seem to want many of the same things from a romantic partner. In terms of sexual satisfaction, sex may be considered to have different meanings for men than for women (Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001). For example, the relationship between sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction seems to be different for women and men (Donahey & Carroll, 1993; McCabe & Cobain, 1998).

Women's sexual satisfaction is tied to a sense of emotional intimacy through verbal communication of feelings, the sharing of joys and fears, and trust (Hite, 1987). Regardless of ethnicity, sexual intimacy tends to be constructed in terms of love and romance for women (Rosenthal, Gifford, & Moore, 1998). For instance, married women were more likely than their husbands to report that the quality of their sex life was mostly determined by levels of compatibility and displays of affection, intimacy, and love (Hatfield, Sprecher, Pillemer, Greenberger, & Wexler, 1988; Patton & Waring, 1985). Both married and dating women desired that their partner talk more lovingly during sex, be more

seductive, be more complimentary, and be more warm and involved (Hatfield, Sprecher, Pillemer, Greenberger, & Wexler, 1988). Anger had a greater negative impact on women's sexual arousal than on men's (Beck & Bozman, 1995). A woman's sexual dissatisfaction seems to be related to the intensity of angry feelings toward her spouse, her disposition to be annoyed or frustrated by many marital situations, her holding in of angry feelings, and her expressing anger as sarcastic remarks (Belanger, Laughrea, & Lafontaine, 2001).

Having a feminine gender role seems to be indirectly related to a woman's sexual satisfaction, in that women have a strong emotional component in their level of sexual satisfaction. For example, when asked why they initiated sex, women tended to say because of love and/or intimacy, and for physical holding (Brown & Auerback, 1981). Male and female undergraduates also think that women's sexual desire is related to romantic love (Regan & Berscheid, 1995). Baumeister (2000) has used this to emphasize women's "erotic plasticity" and the importance of external context on women's sexual responses. Diamond (2003) proposes that love and sexual desire have a bidirectional relationship, with most people perceiving interconnections between the two. Although there is often an assumption that individual's primarily experience sexual desire based on the sex of the object which leads to the experience of love, the opposite can occur. Especially with women, the development of feelings of love may precede sexual desire.

Moreover, the adoption of feminine gender roles is linked to constricted sexual attitudes, which, in turn, predict decreased sexual satisfaction

(Silberbogen, 2002). The messages girls receive about appropriate female behavior may place women at a disadvantage when they engage in sexual relationships. The concept of sexual scripts is a way to understand how people develop culturally shared social norms which guide a person's relationship and sexual behavior (Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Sexual scripts influence sexual behaviors such as partner choice and the sexual activities in which a person will engage. Women receive societal messages that their sexuality should be shameful, passive, and focused on others rather than on the self (Silberbogen, 2002). In keeping with such gender role dictates, women find sexual intercourse less pleasurable than men do, tend to initiate sexual activities less frequently than men do (Haavio-Mannila & Kontula, 1997), and often will attend to their partner's sexual needs and desires while ignoring or being less attentive to their own (Wyatt & Riederle, 1994). Overall, married women report less satisfaction with sex than married men do (Liu, 2003). Because of lower sexual pleasure and lower frequency of engagement in sexual activities, women are often viewed as gatekeepers and are in charge of determining the occurrence of sexual interactions (Rose & Frieze, 1993).

In view of this data about women's sexuality, it is not surprising that men are more likely than women to report that they do not have as much sex in marriage as they would like (Julien, Bouchard, Gagnon, & Pomerleau, 1992). At the start of a relationship, men also desire more sex than women do, and men are ready for sex earlier in relationships (McCabe, 1987). Men are also more likely than women to report partner unwillingness as a reason for not having sex