

The association between sexual costs and sexual satisfaction in women: An exploration of the Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction

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Abstract: Recent research has suggested that female sexual functioning may be strongly tied to sexual satisfaction in some cases and weakly tied in others. The Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction (IEMSS) constitutes a validated theoretical framework within which to explore this complex association. The aim of the current study was to explore whether sexual functioning represents an important sexual cost that is closely linked to sexual satisfaction, and for whom. Data from 200 female undergraduates were analyzed to determine if sexual functioning accounted for the association between sexual costs and sexual satisfaction in women and whether this indirect effect was dependent on adult attachment anxiety. We found a significant simple indirect effect wherein sexual functioning accounted for the association between sexual costs and sexual satisfaction for the sample as a whole. However, attachment anxiety moderated this indirect effect: sexual functioning accounted for the association between sexual costs and satisfaction for women reporting low levels of attachment anxiety, but not for women reporting high levels of attachment anxiety. These findings suggest that, depending on individual attachment orientation, difficulties with sexual functioning may or may not represent key sexual costs that are associated with levels of sexual satisfaction. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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Introduction

Sexual satisfaction has been defined as “an affective response arising from one’s subjective evaluation of the positive and negative dimensions associated with one’s sexual relationship” (Byers, 1999, pg. 98). Sexual satisfaction has been linked to a number of important variables including relationship satisfaction (Byers, 2005) and self-esteem (Hally & Pollack, 1993), and is one of the strongest predictors of marital stability for both men and women (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Thus, it is not surprising that sexual satisfaction is an important component of well-being for most individuals (Mulhall, King, Glina, & Hvidsten, 2008).

Despite its importance, measures of subjective sexual well-being are rarely included in epidemiological studies of female sexual dysfunction (e.g., Shifren, Monz, Russo, Segreti, & Johanes, 2008), even

though difficulties with sexual functioning must be detrimental to personal and/or interpersonal well-being to be considered clinically relevant (Ferenidou, et al., 2008; King, Holt, & Nazareth, 2007). Additionally, when sexual satisfaction is measured, the conceptualization and method of assessment varies widely across studies (Ahrold, Stephenson, & Meston, in press), ranging from single item measures assessing only global sentiments to more comprehensive and specific measures that often include related but distinct constructs such as sexual functioning and sexual distress (Stephenson & Meston, 2010). These inconsistencies in the study of sexual satisfaction underscore the fact that we currently have few organized theories within which to study factors that determine how satisfied individuals are with their sex lives.

However, one validated theory in this area is the Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction

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