

A Comparison of Relationship Satisfaction and Sexual Satisfaction in Short-term and Long-term Relationships

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to look at the differences between couples in short-term and long-term relationships in regards to relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and sexual conflict. Individuals in long-term relationships were hypothesized to have higher relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and a lower level of sexual conflict. An online survey was completed by 81 students from a Midwestern University. Results indicated no statistically significant differences between individuals in short-term and long-term relationships in regards to relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and sexual conflict. The findings yielded a statistically significant positive correlation between relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction. The results also found statistically significant negative correlations between sexual conflict and relationship satisfaction, and sexual conflict and sexual satisfaction. Researchers and practitioners may want to pay attention to the role of sexual conflict in relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Studies on heterosexual sexual activity indicate that premarital sex in the U.S. has become much more common in recent decades. Recent data specify that 74 percent of individuals have premarital sex by the age of 20 (Finer, 2007). In contrast, only 48 percent of individuals in the late 1950s engaged in premarital sex by the age of 20 (Finer, 2003). Given the prevalence of premarital sex, we were interested in exploring the connection between sexual activity within a relationship and the overall quality of the relationship. The proposed study assessed the association of couples' sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction and compared this association in both long-term and short-term relationships.

Relationship satisfaction refers to the level of contentment individuals feel toward their primary romantic relationship. Several factors have been found to positively affect relationship satisfaction including equal distributions of power, commitment, and investment, (Davis, 2000). In addition, Sprecher (2002) measured sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction among 101 undergraduate college couples from a large Midwestern University. Sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction was found to be correlated positively with relationship satisfaction, love for partner, and commitment to the relationship (Sprecher, 2002).

Sexual satisfaction is not limited to satisfaction with sexual intercourse. Gulledge, Gulledge, and Stahmann (2003) found that backrubs/massages, cuddling/holding, kissing on the lips, and kissing on the face were all positively correlated with relationship satisfaction. All of these levels of intimacy were found to be positively related with sexual satisfaction. In addition, the participants reported that behaviors like backrubs and massages are affective ways to express love (Gulledge, Gulledge, & Stahmann, 2003).

Regardless of the level of sexual intimacy in the relationship, sexual conflict can arise for any couple. Situations in which there are a discrepancy in frequency of sexual intimacy, who initiates sexual intimacy, if one partner is not in the mood, and if sexual initiation was turned down have all been found to result in higher sexual conflict in the relationship in a study by Long, Cate, Fehsenfeld, and Williams (1996). The researchers distributed a Premarital Sexual Conflict Scale (PMSCS) to 250 students from a medium sized Midwestern University. Findings indicated that sexual conflict is negatively related to sexual satisfaction and plays a detrimental role in maintaining an ongoing, satisfying relationship (Long, et al., 1996).

Although there is research that shows the effects of sexual conflict on relationships, little research has been done to look at sexual conflict across different levels of relationship length. Long-term and short-term couples differ in their descriptions of desired characteristics for a partner. Attributes such as dependability and sense of humor played vital roles for finding a short-term partner whereas traits like good earning capacity and kindness were more important in a long-term partner (Stewart, Stinnett, & Rosenfeld, 2000). Consequently, individuals in long-term and

short-term relationships may have different expectations regarding sexual satisfaction and this may be associated with the level of sexual conflict and overall relationship satisfaction. One aspect of successful long-term relationships is acceptance toward a partner's traits (Harvey & Omarzu, 2006) and as a result, long-term couples may show less conflict over sexual intimacy. Couples who display positive social behaviors have been shown to be happier with their relationship and show less conflict (Harvey & Omarzu, 2006). These behaviors include listening to their partner during conflict, accepting their responses, and working out compromises to meet the other person's needs (Harvey & Omarzu, 2006). Thus individuals in long-term relationships tend to be more accepting of their partners, and therefore, less likely to engage in conflict of any sort.

Sternberg's triangular love scale proposes that intimacy, passion, and commitment interact and result in different types of "love" (Sternberg, 1986). These findings led to beliefs that the components found in Sternberg's triangular love scale will result in differences between short-term and long-term relationships. It was hypothesized that individuals in long-term relationships would have higher relationship satisfaction than those in short-term relationships. Additionally, individuals in long-term relationships would have higher sexual satisfaction than those in short-term relationships. The final hypothesis was that individuals in long-term relationships would experience lower levels of sexual conflict than those in short-term relationships.

METHODS

The questionnaire was distributed to a random sample stratified by gender to 800 juniors and seniors and received 149 responses (57 males and 92 females). Due to the under-representation of males in the first distribution of the survey, the questionnaire was sent to an additional 150 randomly selected males. The participants had a chance to win three incentives, which included one \$100 prize and two \$50 dollar prizes for completing the questionnaire. The final sample was comprised of 81 undergraduate (30 males and 51 females) students who currently identified being in a heterosexual relationship. Married students and individuals in relationships with someone not living within 50 miles of themselves were considered in a long-distance relationship and were not used in this study.

The questionnaire included measures of sexual conflict, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction. Relationship satisfaction was assessed with the Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) (Hendrick, 1988). This scale uses a 5-item Likert scale that includes questions such as "How well does your partner meet your needs," and "In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship?" (Hendrick, 1988, p.94). This scale was found to have a reasonable reliability with an alpha level of .69. Sexual conflict will be assessed with the Premarital Sexual Conflict Scale (PMSCS). The PMSCS uses a 5-item Likert scale that measures items such as "conflict over the frequency of sexual involvement" and "conflict over who initiates sexual activity" (Cate, Fehsenfeld, Long, & Williams, 1996). We modified this scale to a 4-item Likert scale in an effort to avoid neutrality. The reliability coefficient for the Premarital Conflict Scale for our sample was $\alpha = .92$. Finally, a 7-item Likert scale assessed sexual satisfaction in the relationship with the question "How sexually satisfying is the relationship to you?" (1 = not at all to 7 = very) (e.g., Sprecher, 2003). This scale has been found to have good reliability (Sprecher, 2003).

RESULTS

The hypothesis that individuals in long-term relationships would have higher relationship satisfaction than those in short-term relationships was not supported. In addition, individuals in long-term relationships did not report higher sexual satisfaction levels than those in short-term relationships nor did they experience lower levels of sexual conflict than those in short-term relationships. In order to conduct these analyses, we performed a tertiary split based on the number of months in the current relationship reported by each respondent to create a "long term" group from the top 1/3 and a "short term" group from the bottom third. Short-term relationships were defined by the tertiary split as dating exclusively for 1 to 11 months and long-term relationships were defined as 31 to 74 months. This resulted in 25 participants in a short-term relationship and 27 participants in a long-term relationship. In addition, we utilized respondents "self-categorization" into one of three categories, which were short-term relationships, in-between, or long-term relationships. ANOVA analysis revealed no significant differences on the major variables of sexual conflict, sexual satisfaction or relationship satisfaction on length of relationship (tertiary split or self categorization).

Significant associations among the main variables of interest were detected and can be observed in Table 1. A negative correlation was found for relationship satisfaction and sexual conflict at $r(54) = -.31$ for individuals in long-term relationships and was statistically significant at an alpha level of .005. Individuals in long-term relationships reported a correlation coefficient of $-.31$, which was statistically significant at an alpha level of .005. In long-term relationships, there was a lower correlation for relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction ($r = .10$) than for

short-term relationship ($r = .37$). Although an analysis assessing the difference between the two correlation coefficients (using a Fisher r -to- z transformation) did not yield a significant result, the difference between the correlations showed that sexual satisfaction had a larger influence on relationship satisfaction for individuals in short-term relationships. There was also a negative correlation between sexual conflict and sexual satisfaction with a correlation coefficient of $-.305$. This was found to be statistically significant with an alpha level of $.05$.

TABLE 1. CORRELATIONS BETWEEN RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION, SEXUAL SATISFACTION AND SEXUAL CONFLICT SHOWN BY LENGTH OF RELATIONSHIP

LENGTH OF RELATIONSHIP		Sexual Satisfaction	Sexual Conflict
Short Term (1-11 months) n = 25	Relationship Satisfaction	0.37 p = .066	-0.35 p = .09
Long Term (31-74 Months) n = 27	Relationship Satisfaction	0.10 p = .62	-0.45 p = .02
Overall (n=81)	Relationship Satisfaction	0.23 p = .04	-0.31 p = .005

DISCUSSION

The goal of the present study was to examine the differences between individuals in short-term and long-term relationships. Contrary to our hypothesis, the results showed no significant differences between short-term and long-term relationships in terms of relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and sexual conflict. Even though the hypotheses were not supported, we did find some significant correlations between the variables. Relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction showed a positive correlation but there was a weaker correlation for those in long-term relationships. This finding showed that sexual satisfaction is less related to happiness in long-term relationships. Sexual satisfaction may be less related to happiness in long-term relationships because they have found other aspects of their relationships to keep them content such as communication and common interests.

A strong negative correlation was found between relationship satisfaction and sexual conflict. In addition, there was a strong negative correlation found between sexual satisfaction and sexual conflict, a finding that supports previous research (Long, Cate, Fehsenfeld, and Williams, 1996).

These results are incompatible to Sternberg’s triangular love scale as cited in “A triangular theory of love” (1986). Sternberg proposed that love consists of intimacy, passion, and commitment, which form a hypothetical triangle. Sternberg anticipated that different combinations of these three variables would result in different types of love. By observing qualities of short-term and long-term relationships, we found that commitment level showed no affect in determining the level of satisfaction in the relationship.

The research was hindered by multiple factors. By using pre-existing scales to measure the variables, the questionnaire became extensive and the participants may have grown exhausted from repetitive nature of the study. Some of the items from the relationship satisfaction scale also resulted in confusion. The Likert scale used by Hendrick ranges from low satisfaction to high satisfaction. This scale is clear for the question “In general, how satisfied are you with your relationship,” but caused uncertainty with questions such as “how often do you wish you hadn’t gotten into the relationship?”

In the present study there was also experienced under-representation of short-term relationships. The median length of the relationships in the research was over a year and a half. A pilot study of general education psychology students showed that the majority thought an individual was in a long-term relationship prior to a year in duration. Although short-term relationships were initially defined as six months or less, the skewed response of long-term relationships required a tertiary split to be performed; this resulted in short-term relationships being defined as one

to eleven months. The participants were also asked for their interpretation of what type of relationship they were in; short-term, long-term, or in-between. Out of the 81 participants, only 13 reported thinking that they were in short-term relationships and 15 said they were in-between. Conversely, 53 participants believed they were in long-term relationships.

The concluding limitation of the present research was a sample skewed to a high level of satisfaction. The sexual satisfaction scale in the study asked "how sexually satisfying is the relationship to you?" and used a seven-item Likert scale to evaluate the response. Out of the participant's responses, the average score was 6.0. In addition, none of the 81 participants reported a one or a two on the sexual satisfaction scale. Albeit the limitations, the results are applicable for counselors who work with young adults in relationships because romantic relationships play a crucial role in adolescent development. In addition, the findings can be used to help explain and perhaps minimize problems in early dating situations.

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