

# WHY SOME WOMEN CONSENT TO UNWANTED SEX WITH A DATING PARTNER: INSIGHTS FROM ATTACHMENT THEORY

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Several studies have shown that many college women engage in unwanted sexual activity with a dating partner. However, little research has examined the differences between women who comply with requests for unwanted sexual activity and women who do not. This study utilized an attachment theory framework to investigate individual differences in women's compliant sexual behavior. An ethnically diverse sample of 125 college women who had consented to unwanted sex with a current dating partner completed measures of their attachment style, commitment to their current relationship, perceptions of their partner's commitment, and willingness to consent to unwanted sex in a hypothetical scenario. Results showed that attachment style and commitment perceptions were associated with women's willingness to consent to unwanted sex with a dating partner in the hypothetical scenario and their reasons for this decision. As predicted, anxiously attached women were the most willing to consent to unwanted sex, and they often cited fears that their partner would lose interest in them as reasons for their compliance. Contrary to hypotheses, avoidantly attached women were not the least willing to consent to unwanted sex. They often reported passively complying with a partner's sexual request in order to fulfill relationship obligations. The importance of sexuality to attachment formation in dating relationships and the potential consequences of consenting to unwanted sex are discussed.

In a situation that may be familiar to any college woman, a dating partner desires a more intimate level of sexual involvement than she wants. College men often report wanting more frequent sexual intercourse than they are currently experiencing, especially as a dating relationship develops (e.g., McCabe, 1987; see Baumeister, Catanese, & Voys, 2001 for a review). Most research on sexual conflict has examined situations in which a woman says "no" to a sexually interested male partner. One line of research has focused on how women set limits on men's sexual advances (McCormick, Brannigan, & LaPlante, 1984; Peplau, Rubin, & Hill, 1977). Another line of research has investigated situations in which men use physical force or psychological

coercion to gain compliance from women they know (see Koss, 1993 for a review). Clearly, disagreements about sex do not always result in women rejecting men or men coercing women, particularly in ongoing relationships in which couples have already been sexually intimate. Little is known about sexual interactions in which a woman says "yes" to a sexually interested male partner when she has little or no sexual desire.

### *Consensual Unwanted Sex*

Freely and willingly engaging in unwanted sexual activity has been referred to as consensual unwanted sex or compliant sexual behavior (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Sprecher, Hatfield, Cortese, Potapova, & Levitskaya, 1994; Walker, 1997). Several studies have shown that both men and women consent to unwanted sexual activity. In one study, college students were asked if they had ever indicated to a sexual partner that they wanted to engage in sexual intercourse when they really did not want to do so (Sprecher et al., 1994). Among nonvirgins in the United States, 55% of women and 35% of men reported consenting to unwanted sexual intercourse. In a daily diary study of college students in dating relationships, 50% of women and 26% of men reported consenting to unwanted sexual activity during a two-week period (O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998).

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Dating partners may consent to unwanted sexual activity for any number of reasons. For example, a woman may be tired and not in the mood to have sex but may willingly and pleasantly reciprocate when her boyfriend initiates sex. She may do so because she expects him to respond positively when she initiates sex or because she loves him and wants to satisfy him. To understand compliant sexual behavior in dating relationships, it is important to consider the meaning that dating partners give to sexual activity. During the initial phase of a relationship, sex may constitute a symbolic way to create a sense of couple identity. Feelings of passionate love and sexual attraction are often at their peak, and couples typically experience strong desires for physical contact and closeness (Berscheid, 1984; Traupmann & Hatfield, 1981). Sexual desire is often viewed as a sign of love; consequently, lack of sexual interest may be interpreted as a sign of waning love or dwindling interest in the relationship (Regan, 1998; Regan & Berscheid, 1999).

Women may be particularly likely to consent to unwanted sex in their intimate relationships for several reasons. First, women may assume responsibility for the success of a relationship and blame themselves if a relationship fails. Some women may believe that a valued dating relationship can best be maintained by providing the sexual intimacy that their partner wants. In a study investigating college students' reasons for engaging in unwanted sex, nearly twice as many women (32%) as men (17%) engaged in unwanted petting or intercourse because they were afraid that their partner would terminate the relationship if they refused (Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988). Similarly, 21% of the women in another college sample engaged in unwanted sex because they were afraid that their partner would stop going out with them (Shotland & Hunter, 1995). These studies suggest that women's sexual compliance sometimes serves a relationship maintenance function.

Another reason why women might be particularly likely to engage in unwanted sex is that women may perceive that men have a stronger sexual drive than women do. In one study, 63% of teenage boys and girls judged the male sex drive as "uncontrollable" as opposed to 13% who judged the female sex drive as "uncontrollable" (Moore & Rosenthal, 1993). If girls and women perceive the male sex drive as uncontrollable, they may freely consent to unwanted sex because they feel that it would be useless or unreasonable to refuse (Gilbert & Walker, 1999; Walker, 1997). Across a number of studies, research has found that a quarter to a third of women reported engaging in sexual intercourse because they thought that the man they were with was too aroused to stop (e.g., Koss & Oros, 1982; Miller & Marshall, 1987). In short, there are a number of reasons why women may be more likely than men to consent to sex that they do not desire with a partner.

#### *Attachment Style and Consensual Unwanted Sex*

Currently, few researchers have examined the differences between women who comply with unwanted sexual

requests and women who do not. This study draws on attachment theory to investigate potentially important individual differences in women's compliant sexual behavior. Attachment theory was originally developed to explain why infants become attached to their caregivers and distressed when separated from them. Bowlby (1973, 1982) theorized that through continued interaction with caregivers, children develop "internal working models" that contain beliefs and expectations about whether caretakers are caring and responsive. These working models are then carried forward into new relationships in adulthood where they guide expectations, perceptions, and behavior.

Recent research has focused on attachment in adulthood and, in particular, on how adults with different attachment styles think about and act in their intimate relationships (e.g., Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; see Shaver, Collins, & Clark, 1996 for a review). Hazan and Shaver (1987) constructed the first self-report scale to categorize adults as having one of three attachment styles. Secure adults describe themselves as feeling comfortable with closeness and confident in others' responses; avoidant adults report feeling insecure about others' intentions and preferring distance in relationships; anxious-ambivalent adults describe themselves as insecure about others' responses, strongly desiring intimacy, but fearing separation and rejection by romantic partners.

Researchers have recently developed more complex dimensional assessments of attachment (Fraley & Waller, 1998). A dimensional approach captures more subtle variations in attachment working models than is possible with a categorical approach. Currently, two main dimensions—*anxiety* and *avoidance*—are thought to underlie attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998; Fraley & Waller, 1998). The *anxiety* dimension refers to the extent to which an individual worries about being accepted or rejected by others. The *avoidance* dimension refers to the extent to which an individual feels comfortable with intimacy and closeness with others. Individuals who report low levels of both anxiety and avoidance in their intimate relationships are considered securely attached.

Research shows that individuals high on the dimension of anxiety are often preoccupied with intimacy and securing their partner's long-term commitment but tend to view their partner as reluctant to commit to them (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Kirkpatrick & Davis, 1994; Kuncz & Shaver, 1994). In fact, recent research has shown that individuals high in relationship anxiety often underestimate how positively their partner actually sees them, magnify their partner's dissatisfaction with the relationship, and expect to be rejected by their partner (Downey, Freitas, Michaelis, & Khouri, 1998; Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 2000). Anxiously attached women may perceive a discrepancy between their own and their partner's level of commitment—specifically, they may feel more committed than they perceive their partner to be. If anxiously attached women feel more committed than their partner, then they

may be more willing to consent to unwanted sex in order to promote intimacy or to keep their partner from losing interest in the relationship.

Research shows that individuals who score high on the dimension of avoidance tend to feel emotionally distant in relationships and become apprehensive when a partner tries to get too close (Collins & Read, 1990; Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Avoidant women's discomfort with closeness may influence them to turn down a partner's request for sexual intimacy. In addition, we can conjecture that women high in avoidance may perceive their intimate partner as relatively more committed than they are. If avoidant women perceive that their partner is overly eager to commit to the relationship, then they may be less willing to consent to unwanted sex.

### The Current Study

This study had three main goals. The first goal was to test a proposed model linking a woman's feelings of attachment anxiety and avoidance, her commitment perceptions, and willingness to consent to unwanted sex in a hypothetical scenario. This conceptual model is depicted in Figure 1.

Looking first at anxiety, we predicted that higher levels of anxiety would be associated with greater willingness to consent to unwanted sex. Second, the higher a woman's anxiety, the greater the positive discrepancy she would perceive between her own and her partner's level of commitment. Specifically, we expected that highly anxious women would feel *more* committed than they perceived their partners to be. Third, the greater the positive discrepancy (i.e., per-

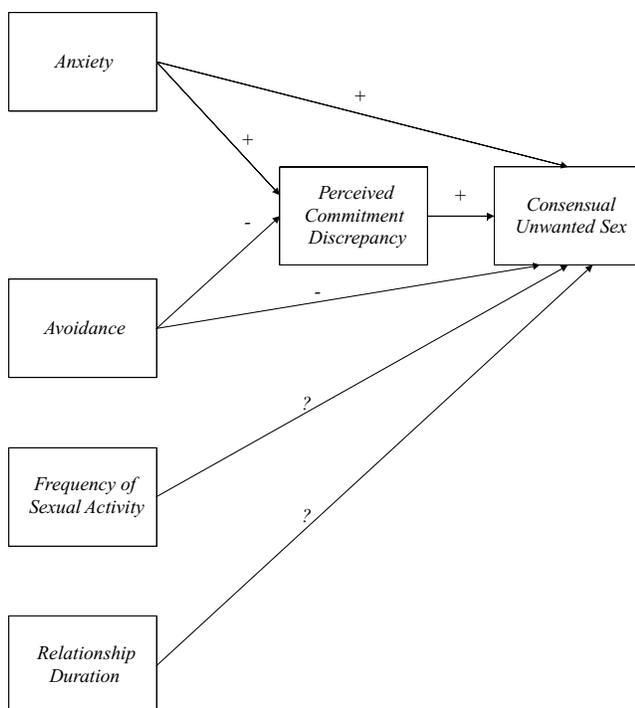


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

ception that she is more committed than her partner), the more willing the woman would be to consent to unwanted sex. Finally, we predicted that the perceived discrepancy in commitment would at least partially account for the link between anxiety and compliant sexual behavior; in technical terms, discrepancies in commitment would mediate the association between anxiety and consensual unwanted sex. We predicted partial rather than full mediation because we do not think that the commitment discrepancy is the only variable that accounts for the influence of anxiety on willingness to consent to unwanted sex. Other possible mediators, not tested in this study, might include perceived power and dependence in a relationship.

Turning next to avoidance, we first predicted that higher levels of avoidance would be associated with less willingness to consent to unwanted sexual activity. Second, the higher a woman's avoidance, the greater the negative discrepancy she would perceive between her own and her partner's level of commitment. Specifically, we expected that highly avoidant women would feel *less* committed than they perceived their partners to be. Third, the greater the negative discrepancy (i.e., perception that partner is more committed than self), the less willing the woman would be to consent to unwanted sex. Again, we predicted that the association between avoidance and compliant sexual behavior would be at least partially mediated by the perceived discrepancy in commitment.

The model also included two additional variables that may be associated with women's willingness to consent to unwanted sex: the length of time a woman had been dating her partner and the frequency with which she engaged in sexual activity with her partner. First, after partners have been dating for awhile, passionate feelings may have cooled down and partners may be more secure with one another. As a result, they may feel more comfortable saying "no" to sexual advances without fearing that they will be perceived as unloving or uninterested in the relationship. It is also possible, however, that partners who have been together for a longer period of time may perceive that they have more to lose and may be more likely to consent to unwanted sex to promote the continuation of the relationship. To examine both of these possibilities, we included relationship duration as another predictor variable in the model. Second, the frequency with which women have engaged in sexual activity with their partner may be associated with their willingness to engage in unwanted sexual interactions. On the one hand, women who engage in sex with their partner quite frequently may feel more comfortable during sexual interactions and find it easier to turn their partner down. On the other hand, women who have developed a norm to have sexual activity on a frequent basis may not want to violate this norm by turning down a partner's request. To examine both of these possibilities, we included frequency of sexual activity as another predictor variable in the model.

A second goal of this study was to examine the generalizability of this model to the experiences of

non-Caucasian women. Research on consensual unwanted sex has been conducted primarily with Caucasian samples (but see Sprecher et al., 1994 for a Japanese sample). Because we recruited our participants from an ethnically diverse college campus, we wanted to explore possible ethnic differences in the frequency of consenting to unwanted sex, as well as possible differences in the associations among variables in the predicted model. Little is known about ethnicity and consensual unwanted sex, so these analyses were exploratory.

A third goal was to examine individual differences in the *reasons* why women consent to unwanted sex. Because anxiously attached women are often preoccupied with intimacy and afraid of abandonment, we hypothesized that higher levels of anxiety would be associated with consenting to unwanted sex to avoid tension in the relationship and to prevent the partner from losing interest. This hypothesis reflects our belief that higher levels of anxiety would be associated with active and fearful attempts to maintain a relationship.

Although we predicted that avoidance would be associated with less willingness to consent to unwanted sex, it is still likely that some highly avoidant women would comply with such requests on occasion. We predicted that highly avoidant women would consent to unwanted sex because they felt obligated to do so. In contrast to anxiously attached women, it seems unlikely that concerns about a partner's waning commitment would be a salient reason for avoidant women's sexual compliance.

## METHOD

### Participants

Women enrolled in introductory and upper-level psychology classes at the University of California, Los Angeles completed a survey for course credit. We imposed three criteria for inclusion in the study. First, women had to have regular weekly contact with an opposite sex dating partner. Second, they had to have previously engaged in sexual activity (fondling partner, oral sex, and sexual intercourse) with their current partner. Third, women had to have previously engaged in at least one act of consensual unwanted sexual intercourse with their current partner. To determine whether women had ever engaged in consensual unwanted sex with their partner, they were asked the question, "With your current partner, have you ever consented to engage in sexual intercourse that you did not desire? In other words, your partner wanted to have sex, you did not want to, but you actually freely and willingly chose to do so anyway?" Sixty-three percent of the sexually active women who saw their partner at least once weekly indicated that they had consented to unwanted sexual intercourse. These 125 women constituted our sample.

The modal woman reported engaging in sexual intercourse 1–2 days a week, although estimates ranged from

less than once a month to every day. The mean age of participants was 21.4 years ( $SD = 2.5$  years; range = 18 to 38 years), and both the mean and median relationship duration were 2 years ( $SD = 2$  years, range = 1 month to 13 years). The sample was ethnically diverse: 28% Asian, 27.2% Caucasian, 19.2% Latina, 10.4% African American, and 15.2% members of mixed or other ethnic groups.

### Measures

*Consensual unwanted sex.* The women answered questions about what they thought they would do in a hypothetical situation with their current partner. The situation, developed in a pilot study of 20 women, read: "Imagine that you are with your partner. You can tell that he really wants to be sexually intimate with you. But you just had a long, stressful day at school, and you are tired. You do not feel like engaging in sexual activity." Participants indicated on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all likely* to 7 = *extremely likely*) how likely it was that they would engage in three sexual behaviors (fondling partner, giving partner oral sex, and sexual intercourse). Because women's willingness to consent to each of the three unwanted sexual behaviors in the hypothetical scenario was not differentially associated with any of the predictor variables (anxiety, avoidance, and perceived commitment discrepancy), we created a composite score for consensual unwanted sex by averaging women's responses to these items (Cronbach alpha = .85). Thus, the final measure of consensual unwanted sex is a continuous measure based on responses to a hypothetical scenario, but only women who had consented to unwanted sex with their current partner responded to this scenario and were included in the final analyses.

*Reasons for consenting to unwanted sex.* The women were also asked to recall the most recent time they had consented to unwanted sex with their current dating partner. They were asked to rate the importance of 12 reasons in influencing their decision on 7-point scales (1 = *not at all important* to 7 = *extremely important*). Several of these reasons were created specifically to test the hypotheses linking the attachment variables to the reasons why women sexually comply, such as "I was worried that if I didn't, my partner wouldn't be interested in me anymore" and "I felt obligated because I had already engaged in sexual intercourse with my current partner." We also included other reasons based on previous research (Muehlenhard & Cook, 1988; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998; Shotland & Hunter, 1995), in order to more fully explore the reasons why women might consent to unwanted sex. The full list of reasons is displayed in Table 1.

*Attachment style.* A continuous measure of attachment was used. Women rated the extent to which 18 statements developed by Collins and Read (1990) applied to them on 7-point scales (1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly*

**Table 1**  
Reasons for Consenting to Unwanted Sex

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Correlation With Anxiety</i>	<i>Correlation With Avoidance</i>
I wanted to promote intimacy in the relationship.	4.31	1.73	.11	-.05
I wanted to satisfy my partner's needs.	5.80	0.99	.01	.01
I wanted to avoid tension in my relationship.	3.66	2.00	.24*	.12
I felt obligated because I had already engaged in sexual intercourse with my current partner.	2.52	1.87	.23*	.30*
We had developed a norm or pattern in our relationship to engage in sexual activity regularly.	3.10	1.97	.09	.24*
I was curious.	1.89	1.47	.10	.09
My partner made the first move, and I didn't want him/her to feel rejected.	3.72	1.96	.05	.07
I wanted to gain sexual experience.	1.66	1.35	.17	-.05
I was worried that my partner would threaten to end our relationship if I didn't engage in intercourse.	1.24	0.78	.14	.12
I was worried that if I didn't, my partner wouldn't be interested in me anymore.	1.61	1.38	.27*	.02
It was easier than saying no.	2.77	1.91	.08	.28*
I didn't want to spoil the mood.	3.25	1.95	.14	.08

**Note:** \*Correlation is significant at  $p < .05$ , two-tailed.

*agree*). The 18-item measure was originally constructed to tap three dimensions of attachment (close, depend, and anxiety). However, recent research has shown that the dimensions of close and depend are substantially intercorrelated and together measure the construct of avoidance (Brennan et al., 1998). It has therefore been recommended that a two-dimensional measure is most appropriate (Brennan et al., 1998; see also Mikulincer & Arad, 1999). We followed this suggestion and analyzed this measure according to two dimensions of attachment: anxiety and avoidance. In the current study, a two-factor-solution factor analysis with varimax rotation explained 38.9% of the scale variance. The first factor (23.3% of explained variance) included the 12 items that comprised avoidance, and the second factor (15.7% of explained variance) included the six anxiety items. The 12 items that loaded highly on the first factor were averaged to create an avoidance score. Sample items include "I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others" and "I find it difficult to allow myself to depend on others." High scores reflect higher avoidance. The reliability for the avoidance measure was high (Cronbach alpha = .86). The six items that loaded highly on the second factor were averaged to create an anxiety score. Sample items include "I do not often worry about being abandoned" (reverse scored) and "I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like." High scores reflect higher anxiety. The reliability for the anxiety measure was high (Cronbach alpha = .85).

**Commitment questions.** We used a standard 7-item measure of commitment (Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998).

Participants responded to such questions as "I want our relationship to last for a very long time" and "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner" on 9-point scales (0 = *do not agree at all* to 8 = *agree completely*). The reliability for this scale was high (Cronbach alpha = .90). This scale was then modified to assess participants' perceptions of their partner's commitment. The items were identical except for the referent (e.g., "My partner wants our relationship to last for a very long time"). The reliability for this new measure of perceived partner commitment was high (Cronbach alpha = .89). Finally, we created a measure of perceived commitment discrepancy between self and partner by subtracting women's score on the measure of perceived partner commitment from their own commitment score. On average, women reported similar levels of own commitment and perceived partner commitment (the mean discrepancy score was zero), but the discrepancy scores were quite variable (range = -6 to +5). Positive commitment discrepancy scores reflect a woman's greater commitment and negative commitment discrepancy scores reflect her perception that her partner is more committed.

## RESULTS

Data analysis addressed the three main goals of the study. First, we tested the proposed model linking women's attachment style, perceptions of commitment, and willingness to engage in unwanted sex with an intimate partner in the hypothetical scenario. Second, we explored possible ethnic differences in consensual unwanted sex. Third, we tested

**Table 2**  
Correlations Among All Key Variables

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Anxiety	–							
2. Avoidance	.31*	–						
3. Commitment	–.14	–.32*	–					
4. Perceived partner commitment	–.42*	–.15	.50*	–				
5. Perceived commitment discrepancy	.23*	–.21*	.64*	–.36*	–			
6. Consensual unwanted sex in the hypothetical scenario	.23*	.01	.14	–.14	.28*	–		
7. Relationship duration	–.16*	.04	.18*	.24*	–.03	.02	–	
8. Frequency of sexual activity	.19*	.14	–.15	–.17*	–.01	–.29*	.13	–

**Note:** \*Correlation is significant at  $p < .05$ , two-tailed.

the predicted associations between a woman's attachment style and her reasons for consenting to unwanted sex.

*Testing the Model*

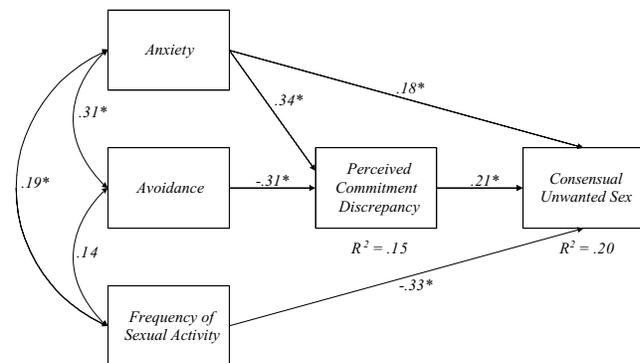
We used path analysis in the EQS computer program (Bentler, 1995) to test the hypothesized associations among the variables in the proposed model, as well as the overall fit of the model. Parameter estimates were based on maximum likelihood estimation using a covariance matrix. Women's responses to the hypothetical scenario were used as a continuous measure of consensual unwanted sex. Table 2 presents the correlations among all variables in the model.

Model fit was evaluated with three indices. The chi-square statistic tests whether the hypothesized model adequately explains the observed pattern of data. A nonsignificant chi-square indicates good model fit, although it is directly related to sample size. In contrast, the Comparative Fit Index (CFI) and the Robust Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) are computed independent of sample size. The CFI ranges from 0 to 1.0, and higher scores reflect better model fit. A CFI value of .90 is acceptable, although values of .95 are more desirable (Bentler, 1990). The RMSEA index measures the amount of residual between the observed and predicted covariance structure and compensates for the effect of model complexity (Steiger & Lind, 1980), with values less than .05 indicating a close fit (Browne & Cudeck, 1993).

As shown in Figure 2, path analyses revealed that many of the hypotheses linking the two attachment variables, perceived discrepancies in commitment, and willingness to engage in consensual unwanted sex in the hypothetical scenario were supported. First, the higher a woman's anxiety, the more willing she was to consent to unwanted sexual activity. Second, the higher a woman's anxiety, the greater the positive discrepancy (i.e., she feels more committed than her partner) she perceived between her own and her partner's level of commitment. Third, the greater the positive discrepancy between a woman's commitment and her per-

ceptions of her partner's commitment, the more willing she was to consent to unwanted sex. Finally, anxiety predicted compliant sexual behavior when the commitment discrepancy was omitted, but the strength of this relation was reduced when the commitment discrepancy was added to the model ( $b = .23$  to  $b = .18, z = 2.14, p < .05$ ).<sup>1</sup> Thus, the measure of perceived commitment discrepancy partially mediated the association between anxiety and compliant sexual behavior. The presence of mediation suggests that women high in anxiety are more willing to consent to unwanted sex in the hypothetical scenario at least partially because they feel that they are more committed than their partner.<sup>2</sup>

Looking at the avoidance pathway, the greater a woman's avoidance, the greater the negative discrepancy (i.e., she feels less committed than her partner) she perceived between her own and her partner's level of commitment. Second, the greater the negative discrepancy, the less willing she was to consent to unwanted sexual activity with her dating partner in the hypothetical scenario. (The path coefficient presented in Figure 2 is positive because the commitment discrepancy measure was scored such that the higher



**Fig. 2.** Model testing women's perceived commitment discrepancy as a mediator between attachment variables and willingness to consent to unwanted sex in the hypothetical scenario.

**Note:** Path coefficients marked by an asterisk are significant at  $p < .05$ , two-tailed.

scores reflect a woman's feeling that she is more committed than her partner.) While the indirect effect of avoidance on consensual unwanted sex was significant ( $z = 2.06, p < .05$ ), we found no evidence for the predicted direct negative association between avoidance and willingness to consent to unwanted sex. Thus, there was no evidence for mediation in the case of avoidance. Because the path between avoidance and consensual unwanted sex was nonsignificant, we dropped it from the model.

We also examined effects of two other relationship variables that may relate to consensual unwanted sex. We thought it possible that relationship duration may be associated with willingness to consent to unwanted sex in the hypothetical scenario. In fact, however, there was no association between the length of a woman's relationship with her partner and her willingness to consent to unwanted sex,  $r(125) = .02, p > .05$ . Thus, this path was dropped from the model. We also hypothesized that the frequency with which women have engaged in sexual activity with their partner may be associated with their willingness to engage in unwanted sexual interactions. Indeed, the less often women reported engaging in sexual activity with their partner, the more willing they were to consent to unwanted sex. Thus, this path was retained in the final model. All fit indices revealed that the model fit the data well,  $\chi^2(2) = .23, p = .89$ , CFI = 1.0, RMSEA < .01.<sup>3</sup>

### *Ethnic Comparisons*

A second goal of this study was to explore possible ethnic differences in consensual unwanted sex. Although the sample sizes were too small to test the fit of the model separately for each ethnic group, we were able to conduct some exploratory analyses. We first examined base rates of consenting to unwanted sex among various ethnic groups. In general, findings were roughly comparable for all groups except African American women. Approximately one-half to two-thirds of the Asian American, Caucasian, and Latina women, as well as women of mixed/other ethnicity, reported that they had consented to unwanted sex with their current partner. In contrast, all of the African American women reported that they had done so. Additionally, we inspected the correlations among key variables separately for each of the ethnic groups. Again, the pattern of associations was similar for all groups except African American women. For African American women, several differences emerged from the model shown in Figure 2. First, both avoidance and anxiety were associated with the feeling that one is more committed than a partner. Second, instead of anxiety, avoidance was positively associated with willingness to consent to unwanted sex. Finally, the greater the positive discrepancy in commitment (i.e., perception that self is more committed than partner), the less willing African American women were to consent to unwanted sex.

### *Reasons for Consenting to Unwanted Sex*

A third goal was to test the predicted associations between a woman's attachment style and her reasons for engaging in the most recent experience of consensual unwanted sex. As shown in Table 1, several of the most commonly reported reasons for sexual compliance were to satisfy a partner's needs, to promote intimacy in the relationship, to avoid rejecting a partner, or to avoid tension in the relationship. Desires to gain sexual experience or fears about a partner losing interest were given considerably less often as reasons for sexual acquiescence.

Our hypotheses concerned the associations between women's levels of anxiety and avoidance and their specific reasons for consenting to unwanted sex. As predicted, results revealed that the greater a woman's anxiety, the more likely she was to indicate that she had consented to unwanted intercourse to avoid tension in her relationship,  $r(125) = .24, p < .01$ , and to keep her partner from losing interest,  $r(125) = .27, p < .01$ . Both of these reasons represent fearful attempts to prevent conflict or romantic relationship dissolution. A woman's level of anxiety was also associated with her decision to engage in sex out of a feeling of obligation,  $r(125) = .23, p < .05$ . All of these correlations remained significant after controlling for women's levels of avoidance. As predicted, results also revealed that the greater a woman's avoidance, the more likely she was to indicate that she had consented to unwanted sex because she felt obligated to do so,  $r(125) = .30, p < .01$ , had developed a norm in her relationship to engage in sex regularly,  $r(125) = .24, p < .01$ , and because it was easier than saying no to her partner,  $r(125) = .29, p < .01$ . All of these correlations remained significant after controlling for women's levels of anxiety.

Women also rated the importance of some other reasons for which we did not generate specific hypotheses. These were included for exploratory purposes. Such reasons as "I wanted to satisfy my partner's needs" and "I wanted to promote intimacy in my relationship" reflect a woman's desire to actively please her partner or improve her relationship. Neither of these reasons was associated with anxiety or avoidance. Other reasons focused on the exploratory nature of women's decisions to consent to unwanted sex such as "I was curious" and "I wanted to gain sexual experience." Again, neither anxiety nor avoidance was associated with willingness to consent to unwanted sex for exploratory reasons.

## DISCUSSION

This research has advanced our understanding of women's responses to unwanted sexual initiatives from a male dating partner, highlighting situations in which women comply with a partner's wishes rather than turn down his request. As such, our results support a growing body of research showing that women (and men) engage in sexual activity for

a variety of reasons other than sexual desire (Baumeister, 2000; Beck, Bozman, & Qualtrough, 1991; Cooper, Shapiro, & Powers, 1998; Regan, 1998; Regan & Berscheid, 1999; Regan & Dreyer, 1999). Sometimes a woman chooses to be sexually intimate with her partner because she feels genuine desire and passion; at other times, she may do so to promote intimacy in the relationship, to avoid conflict, to gain sexual experience, or because she fears that her partner will leave her.

The most notable contribution of this study is to demonstrate the usefulness of applying an attachment theory framework to understanding individual differences in women's unwanted sexual behaviors. Anxiously attached women were not only more willing to consent to unwanted sex in the hypothetical scenario, but reported doing so for different reasons than women who were less anxious in their relationships. Women high in attachment anxiety reported consenting to unwanted sex in order to avoid conflict or to prevent a partner from losing interest in the relationship. These findings extend previous research demonstrating that anxiously attached individuals are overly sensitive to rejection (Downey & Feldman, 1996; Downey et al., 1998) by showing that fear of rejection translates into behavior, and more specifically, sexual behaviors that are at least partially motivated by desires to prevent the dissolution of an important intimate relationship.

We had originally hypothesized that avoidant women would be less willing to consent to unwanted sex in the hypothetical scenario because they would want to avoid emotionally intimate interactions, especially if they were confident in their partner's commitment. The lack of association between avoidance and consensual unwanted sex, coupled with the finding that avoidance was associated with women's citing relationship obligations as a reason for compliance provides tentative support for an alternative possibility: When their partner initiates sex that they do not desire to engage in, women high and low in avoidance may be equally likely to comply. However, their reasons for doing so may differ. Women who are highly avoidant seem to follow the path of least resistance by complying with their partner's sexual request in order to fulfill relationship obligations.

This study linked a woman's attachment style to her own feelings of commitment and her perceptions of her partner's commitment. High levels of anxiety were associated with feeling greater commitment than a partner, and high levels of avoidance were associated with feeling less committed than a partner. The psychological experience of feeling more or less committed than one's partner may be associated with negative emotions that are harmful to both personal and couple well-being. A recent study of dating and married couples found that individuals who perceived nonmutuality in commitment were less satisfied with their relationships, felt less intimate, used less effective problem solving techniques, and shared fewer activities together than did individuals who felt equally committed to their

partners (Drigotas, Rusbult, & Verette, 1999). The current study extends knowledge about the effects of perceived imbalances in relationship commitment to the sexual domain by showing that women who feel more committed than their partner may be more likely to engage in sex for reasons other than sexual desire.

Several limitations of the current investigation deserve comment. First, the path model was based on women's responses to a hypothetical measure of consensual unwanted sex. We believe that by limiting the sample to women who had actual experiences with consensual unwanted sex, we excluded the women who may have found it difficult to answer questions about the hypothetical scenario. Nonetheless, a measure of actual behavior would have been desirable. Future research should include continuous measures of actual sexual behavior, such as the frequency of consensual unwanted sex over a particular period of time.

Second, the model that we tested implies a causal ordering in which variation on the dimensions of anxiety and avoidance affect women's perceptions of their own and their partner's commitment. Although the correlational data we presented are consistent with this sequence, they do not offer a definitive causal test. Because attachment styles are developed in infancy (Bowlby, 1973, 1982) and are relatively stable across the lifespan (e.g., Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell, & Albersheim, 2000), it seems likely that styles developed early on in life influence people to either under- or over-perceive a partner's commitment in adulthood. It is also possible, however, that the psychological experience of feeling more committed than a partner may cause women to feel more anxious in their relationships, and that the experience of feeling less committed than a partner may make women even more avoidant. Longitudinal research is needed to investigate the causal associations among attachment style, perceived commitment, and consensual unwanted sex.

A third limitation concerns the small size of several correlations and path coefficients. The attachment and commitment perception variables on their own explained only 10% of the variance in willingness to consent to unwanted sex in the hypothetical scenario. When the frequency with which women engage in sexual activity with their partners was added to the model, another 10% of the variance in compliant sexual behavior was explained. Clearly, there are many other factors that go into women's decisions to acquiesce to a partner. Attachment and commitment explained only a small piece of the puzzle. Future research should identify other key factors.

A final limitation of our study concerns the conceptualization and measurement of avoidance. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) have argued that avoidantly attached individuals can be either dismissive or fearful. Dismissive individuals often protect themselves against disappointment by avoiding intimate relationships and maintaining a sense of independence. Fearful individuals also expect disappointment and rejection, but instead of developing a sense of

invulnerability in relationships, they come to view themselves as undeserving of others' love. Had our measure of attachment enabled us to examine the sexual behavior patterns of these two groups of women separately, the results might have been different. The independence strivings of dismissive women might lead them to be less willing to consent to unwanted sex. In contrast, fearful women's concerns about rejection might influence them to be more willing to consent to unwanted sex. Additionally, fearful women might also comply for some of the same reasons as anxious-ambivalent women, namely, in order to keep their partners from losing interest in the relationship. Future research should examine the relevance of the dismissive versus fearful distinction to compliant sexual behavior among women.

A strength of this study is that it has extended research on adult attachment to sexual interactions among dating partners. A fundamental difference between attachment in childhood and adulthood is that adult attachment is typically created in a sexual relationship with a peer (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Because adult attachment bonds are often formed and strengthened through sexually intimate interactions (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994), research guided by attachment theory will enable us to better understand individual differences in women's motivations to engage in sex. Investigations into the reciprocal influence of attachment on sexual behavior and vice versa offer a promising direction for future research.

Further, the ethnic diversity of the sample adds to the generalizability of our findings. Previous research on unwanted sexual interactions has been conducted primarily with Caucasian women. In our exploratory ethnic analyses, we found that all of the African American women in our sample had consented to unwanted sex with their current partner, as opposed to one-half to two-thirds of all of the other women. While we did not predict this ethnic difference, one possible explanation for this difference concerns African American women's greater preferences for an African American male dating partner and the relatively smaller number of African American men than African American women on the UCLA campus. Clearly, with a subsample of only 13 women, we cannot draw conclusions about African American women's experiences with consensual unwanted sex. However, these findings do raise questions about the generalizability of our model to African American women and should encourage new research that focuses more explicitly on their experiences.

Another valuable direction for future research concerns the consequences of women's decisions to engage in unwanted sex. Though many women consent to unwanted sex, not all women comply for the same reasons. Women's motives for compliance may lead to strikingly different personal consequences. A woman who complies because she loves her partner and feels that he would do the same for her may feel good about pleasing her partner. In contrast, a woman who complies out of fear of rejection may feel that she has little control over couple decision-making and

may habitually yield to the wishes of her partner in this and perhaps other areas of their relationship. Future research will benefit from a careful exploration of the diversity of women's motivations for sexual intimacy, as well as the consequences of sexual compliance for personal and couple well-being.

Findings from this study also have implications for research on women's sexual risk-taking. If anxiously attached women are less likely than other women to communicate their lack of sexual interest to a dating partner, they may also find it difficult to communicate their desire to use a condom or engage in other forms of safer sex. Recent research has shown that anxiously attached women are more likely than securely attached women to have unwanted pregnancies (Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998; Hammen, 1997). The current study provides a possible explanation for these findings: anxiously attached women may engage in more sexually risky behaviors because they fear losing an important relationship. Efforts to prevent sexually risky behaviors have drawn heavily on models that stress the role of beliefs, attitudes, and motivations specific to protecting health and avoiding disease (e.g., Levinson, Jaccard, & Beamer, 1995). Models such as the health belief model (e.g., Jaccard, 1981) fail to consider the varied reasons why people have sex, as well as the gendered and inherently relational aspects of sexual interactions—for example, a woman's beliefs about love and intimacy, her relative commitment to and power in a relationship, her expectations and hopes about the future of her relationship, and her level of comfort in communicating her desires to her partner (Amaro, 1995; Wyatt & Riederle, 1994).

Taken together, results from this study highlight that consenting to unwanted sex with a dating partner is a common experience for college women. Attachment theory offers insight into the varied reasons why some women acquiesce to an intimate partner. Results from this study suggest several promising directions for future research that will advance our understanding of attachment theory, sexual interactions among young people, and intersections between the two.

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## NOTES

1. To test for the presence of mediation, the path between the predictor variable (anxiety) and the outcome variable (consensual unwanted sex) must be significantly reduced when the mediating variable (perceived commitment discrepancy) is controlled for. In EQS, this reduction is equivalent to the indirect effect of the predictor variable on the outcome variable and is calculated with a *z*-test.
2. There is considerable controversy surrounding the use of difference scores (see Rogosa, 1988 for a discussion about some appropriate uses). Griffin, Murray, and Gonzalez (1999) present several alternatives to the use of difference scores. However,

none of their proposed alternatives addressed the question of interest in this paper, namely, the extent to which one variable is greater or lesser than another. Nonetheless, we chose to conduct an additional analysis to test whether both components of the difference score (i.e., commitment and perceived partner commitment) have independent effects on willingness to consent to unwanted sex. Willingness to consent to unwanted sex was regressed onto both commitment and perceived partner commitment. Results revealed that consensual unwanted sex was significantly predicted by commitment ( $b = .28, p < .01$ ) and by perceived partner commitment ( $b = -.28, p < .01$ ),  $F(2,122) = 5.15, p < .01$ . Additionally, the correlations among the two components of the difference score and other key variables are presented in Table 2.

3. We conducted an additional analysis to obtain more accurate estimates of the parameters without measurement error. To do this, we set the error variance of each of the variables composed of more than one item (i.e., anxiety, avoidance, and willingness to consent to unwanted sex) to equal one minus that variable's reliability multiplied by the variance of that variable [ $(1 - \text{reliability}) \text{ variance}$ ]. When we tested the model in this way, the parameter estimates were nearly identical to those reported earlier. In addition, the model still fit the data quite well,  $\chi^2(2) = .15, p = .93, \text{CFI} = 1.0, \text{RMSEA} < .01$ .

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