

Applying Theories of Communal Motivation to Sexuality

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Abstract

One important but challenging aspect of maintaining a satisfying romantic relationship is keeping the sexual spark alive. Research suggests the importance of a couple's sexual connection in the maintenance of their relationship, but sustaining high levels of desire for a partner over the course of time can be difficult. In the current review, we argue that one novel approach to understanding how couples might maintain desire and satisfaction over the course of time in their relationships is applying theories of communal motivation to the domain of sexuality. In this line of research, we have demonstrated that people high in *sexual communal strength* – those who are motivated to be non-contingently responsive to their partners' sexual needs – are able to sustain higher sexual desire over the course of time and navigate sexual disagreements in a way that maintains both partners' relationship quality. Future research directions include broadening the view of sexual needs to include the need to decline or reject a partner's sexual advances and investigating how partners manage unmet sexual needs.

Consider the following description of a long-term couple. Jack and Elaine have been married for nearly 10 years and have two young children, and both work outside the home. Although they respect each other, have common interests, and share household tasks, over time, their passion and desire for each other have waned. They often disagree about when and how frequently to engage in sex and when sex does occur, it is often done begrudgingly. They long to reignite the sexual spark they had earlier in their relationship. Popular media messages about sex in relationships would suggest that an important route to maintaining a satisfying sex life involves mastering specific sexual techniques. For example, advice in popular women's magazines might tell Jack and Elaine about the importance of expanding their sexual repertoire, perhaps advising that they introduce sexual props such as sex toys and lingerie (Menard & Kleinplatz, 2008). Echoing these popular media messages, in research on sexual desire in relationships, clinicians and researchers have primarily focused on examining the associations between individual attitudes and sexual desire. For example, among older adults, a person's attitude about the importance of sex is a stronger predictor of their sexual desire than health-related factors, such as illnesses, hormonal changes, or medication (DeLamater & Sill, 2005). Previous research has found that less sexual guilt (Woo, Brotto, & Gorzalka, 2011) and more positive feelings about one's own body (Seal, Bradford, & Meston, 2009) are associated with higher sexual desire for a relationship partner. With some notable exceptions (e.g., Rosen, Bergeron, Lambert, & Steben, 2013; Rosen, Bergeron, Leclerc, Lambert, & Steben, 2010), the existing research and popular media messages might suggest that Jack and Elaine should focus on their own individual attitudes about sex, place more value on sex, and become more comfortable with their sexuality as a route to addressing the sexual issues in their relationship. What is limited in the research and common discourse on the maintenance of sexual desire in long-term relationships is a partner-focused or

prosocial perspective to understanding how couples can maintain desire over time. This perspective suggests that in addition to accepting and pursuing one's own sexual pleasure, relationship partners can learn to focus on the experience of giving to each other and delighting in one another's pleasure.

A growing body of research on the psychology of close relationships focuses on the benefits of giving to others. Prosocial behavior, such as providing care to others when in need, is associated with many benefits, not only for the recipient of this care but also for the giver (Canevello & Crocker, 2010; Crocker & Canevello, 2008; Kogan et al., 2010; Le, Impett, Kogan, Webster, & Cheng, 2013). In the current review, we discuss our work applying the social-psychological theory of communal motivation – which stipulates the importance of norms involving giving to a partner based on need without the expectation of direct reciprocation (Clark & Mills, 2012) – to the domain of sexuality and present evidence that a communal approach to sexual relationships is one novel way that we can better understand how couples maintain sexual desire and satisfaction, as well as how romantic partners sustain feelings of connection, even during times when desire and sexual satisfaction are low.

The Importance of Maintaining Sexual Desire and Satisfaction in Romantic Relationships

Sexuality is a key factor that shapes the quality of romantic relationships (see reviews by Impett, Muise, & Peragine, 2014; Muise, Kim, McNulty, & Impett, 2016). Research has consistently demonstrated that people who are the most satisfied with their sex lives are also the most satisfied with their romantic relationships (e.g., Breznsnyak & Whisman, 2004; Byers, 2005; McNulty, Wenner, & Fisher, 2014; Yeh, Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger, & Elder, 2006). Despite the importance of sex for relationships, couples face numerous challenges to having and maintaining a satisfying sexual relationship. Empirical research reveals that sexual desire tends to peak in the beginning stages of romantic relationships as intimacy is rapidly developing (Baumeister & Bratlavsky, 1999) and then often declines over time as partners become more secure and comfortable in the relationship (see review by Impett et al., 2014). As a result, romantic partners will inevitably encounter times when their sexual interests differ (Impett & Peplau, 2003; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1996), and many long-term couples find themselves in situations in which they have divergent sexual interests (Davies, Katz, & Jackson, 1999; Mark, 2012; Mark & Murray, 2012). For example, couples may disagree about how frequently to engage in sex or the particular activities in which they would like to engage (Byers & Lewis, 1988; Davies et al., 1999; O'Sullivan & Byers, 1996).

The importance of sex for the quality of relationships, coupled with the challenges that many couples face maintaining desire and satisfaction over the longer term, highlights the need to understand how couples can maintain and reignite sexual desire and have better sex lives and relationships. Indeed, although sexual desire tends to decline or waver over the course of a relationship on average (Call, Sprecher, & Schwartz, 1995; Sims & Meana, 2010), desire does not decline for everyone (Acevedo & Aron, 2009), and not everyone experiences accompanying declines in relationship satisfaction (Sims & Meana, 2010). Even for the many romantic partners who experience discrepancies in sexual desire or have divergent sexual interests, some are able to navigate these differences with greater success and maintain satisfaction even in the face of sexual disagreements. The close connection between sexual and relationship quality means that good sex is one powerful mechanism for enhancing relationships. When couples can successfully navigate sexual issues and maintain a strong sexual connection over the course of their relationships, feelings of closeness and intimacy in the relationship can be strengthened (Rehman et al., 2011).

Applying Communal Theory to Sexuality

One novel approach to understanding how couples might maintain desire and satisfaction over the course of time in their relationships involves applying theories of communal motivation to the domain of sexuality. Theories of communal giving suggest that in communal relationships – such as those we have with family members, romantic partners, and close friends – people provide care non-contingently; that is, they give care to each other with little concern for what they will receive in return. In contrast, in exchange relationships, benefits are given with the expectation of direct reciprocation, with partners tracking benefits in order to keep things even (Clark & Mills, 2012; Mills & Clark, 1986). Romantic partners indicate that following communal norms (i.e., giving benefits to improve a partner's welfare), as opposed to exchange norms (i.e., giving benefits with the expectation that similar benefits will be reciprocated), is ideal in long-term relationships as they create opportunities for couples to engage in mutually enjoyable activities that meet both partners' needs (Clark, Lemay, Graham, Pataki, & Finkel, 2010).

Although initial research has documented broad differences between communal and exchange relationships, more recent work in this area has shown that across close relationships, people vary in the extent to which they feel responsible for meeting a partner's needs. Individual differences in the motivation to respond non-contingently to a specific partner's needs are referred to as *communal strength* (Mills, Clark, Ford, & Johnson, 2004). For example, people high in communal strength are more willing to be responsive to their partner's needs and sacrifice for the welfare of the partner and relationship (Kogan et al., 2010). People high in communal strength give to their partner insofar as the personal costs incurred in meeting their partner's needs are reasonable, and they trust that their partner will be responsive to their own needs when they arise (Mills et al., 2004).

Recently, we applied theories of communal motivation to the sexual domain of relationships. Perhaps no other relationship domain involves more dependence between partners than the domain of sexuality, given that the majority of long-term couples are monogamous and therefore cannot – or are not allowed to – get their sexual needs met outside of their current relationship. That is, partners in ongoing, committed relationships often rely on one another exclusively for sexual fulfillment, setting the sexual realm apart from other relationship domains in which partners are able to get their emotional and social needs met by people outside the relationship. For example, whereas only a subset of people in romantic relationships are permitted to pursue sexual activities with additional partners (e.g., Rubin, Moors, Matsick, Ziegler, & Conley, 2014), most people are permitted to pursue leisure activities with family members and friends and to rely on members of their broader social network for emotional support (Doherty & Feeney, 2004; Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006). Therefore, partners in ongoing, committed relationships have a unique and important role to play in meeting and fulfilling one another's sexual needs.

Applying theories of communal motivation to the domain of sexuality provides insight into how some couples are able to stave off declines in sexual desire or remain satisfied even when partners are facing discrepancies in their sexual interest. *Sexual communal strength* is the extent to which people are motivated to be non-contingently responsive to their partner's sexual needs, and we have assessed sexual communal strength with items adapted from the general measure of communal strength, such as “How far would you be willing to go to meet your partner's sexual needs?” and “How high a priority for you is meeting the sexual needs of your partner?” (Muise, Impett, Desmarais & Kogan, 2013). In a qualitative study where we asked people what they might do to meet their partner's sexual needs, several themes were identified (Muise & Impett, 2015). Most commonly, people reported that they would engage in sex even when not entirely in the mood. People also indicated that they would meet their partner's sexual needs by being open-minded about their partner's preferences, communicating with

their partner about their sexual likes and dislikes, and ensuring mutuality such that both partners' needs are acknowledged and met in the relationship.

People with communally motivated partners do, in fact, report that their partners are more responsive to their needs during sex, and in turn, they feel more satisfied and committed to the relationship. That is, people who report high levels of sexual communal strength have partners who recognize their motivation to meet their sexual needs and reap relationship benefits as a result (Muise & Impett, 2015). Additional evidence from related research on *sexual transformations* – how frequently people make changes to their sexual habits for their partner and how they feel about making these changes – suggests that having a partner who changes his or her sexual habits to meet your sexual needs is associated with higher relationship quality (Burke & Young, 2012). In one study, participants were asked how frequently they have made changes to their sexual habits for the sake of a romantic partner, such as engaging in sex more frequently than they might desire, as well as how satisfied they feel with making such changes (Burke & Young, 2012). People who indicated that they made more frequent sexual transformations had romantic partners who reported being more satisfied with their relationship. In addition, above and beyond the frequency of making sexual transformations, the extent to which people felt happy about changing their sexual habits for a partner was associated with both partners' relationship satisfaction (Burke & Young, 2012), suggesting that both making sexual changes for a partner and feeling positively about those changes are beneficial in relationships. Sexual transformations and sexual communal strength are conceptually similar but distinct in that sexual transformations refer to how frequently a person has changed his or her sexual habits for a partner (i.e., a behavioral measure), whereas sexual communal strength refers to how motivated a person is to meet the sexual needs of his or her partner. It is possible that a person could be highly motivated to meet his or her partner's sexual needs (i.e., high in sexual communal strength) but has not yet made any specific changes for his or her partner (but would be motivated to do so if the opportunity arose). It is also possible that people have made sexual changes at their partner's request but did so not to meet the needs of their partner but perhaps to get something for themselves in return (i.e., for exchange reasons). In one study of people in relationships who were recruited online ($N = 456$), we assessed both sexual communal strength and sexual transformations (unpublished data; see Study 2 in Maxwell et al., invited resubmission for the sample description). In fact, these measures were moderately correlated ($r = .40, p < .001$), and both our measure of sexual communal strength and the measure of sexual transformations uniquely predicted greater sexual and relationship satisfaction. This suggests that both being motivated to meet a partner's sexual needs (i.e., sexual communal strength) and actually making behavioral changes for a partner (i.e., sexual transformations) are important for relationship and sexual satisfaction.

Being motivated to meet a partner's sexual needs is not only associated with benefits for the partner, but somewhat paradoxically, focusing on meeting a partner's sexual needs is linked to increased benefits for the self. For example, in a sample of long-term couples, sexual communal strength was positively associated with the person's own sexual desire and satisfaction (Muise et al., 2013; Muise & Impett, 2015). Further, communal individuals also maintained sexual desire over a four-month period of time in long-term relationships. Whereas people lower in sexual communal strength experienced declines in sexual desire, those people who were more highly motivated to meet their partner's sexual needs began the study with slightly higher desire and were able to maintain sexual desire over time (Muise et al., 2013). This finding is quite remarkable given that the average relationship duration of couples in this study was 11 years and desire is known to precipitously decline with increased relationship duration (Impett et al., 2014).

From our research, it does not seem that communally motivated people reap these benefits because of underlying self-interested motives, such as fulfilling their own sexual desires, but instead out of a genuine interest in connecting with their partners and seeing them happy.

In fact, one key reason why people high in sexual communal strength report higher levels of daily desire is because they are more likely to pursue sex to promote positive outcomes for their partner such as providing their partner with sexual pleasure or to promote positive outcomes for their relationship such as increasing intimacy and closeness (i.e., partner-focused approach goals) (Muise, et al., 2013). In another line of research, we have demonstrated that partner-focused approach goals, such as wanting to enhance intimacy with a partner or make a partner feel loved and desired, are associated with both partners reporting higher sexual desire, more positive sexual experiences, and greater relationship satisfaction (Impett, Strachman, Finkel, & Gable, 2008; Muise et al., 2013). In fact, in romantic relationships, engaging in sex to promote positive outcomes for the partner and the relationship is associated with greater desire and satisfaction (Muise, Boudreau, & Rosen, 2016), even compared with other, more self-focused reasons, such as to experience pleasure or have an orgasm (Impett et al., 2008; Muise et al., 2013). Sexual communal strength is also not associated with having sex to avoid negative outcomes for the self or partner (i.e., self- and partner-focused avoidance goals; Muise, Impett, & Desmarais, 2013), which tend to be associated with lower desire and satisfaction in relationships (Muise, Impett, & Desmarais, 2013). This suggests that being communal in the sexual domain is not about meeting a partner's needs out of pressure from the partner, feelings of guilt, or fear of a partner's disappointment. Instead, people high in sexual communal strength are genuinely interested in their partner's happiness rather than feeling a sense of duty or obligation, and this is one reason why they benefit from their motivation to meet their partner's sexual needs.

Despite the fact that communally motivated people tend to meet their partner's sexual needs out of a genuine concern for their partner's pleasure and happiness, it is one thing for communal people to report that sex is highly satisfying when both partners' passions are running high; it is quite another to remain focused on meeting a partner's needs when, for example, a person's own desire for sex is low. Perhaps one of the most stringent tests of the potential benefits of sexual communal strength is whether communally motivated people are still willing to meet their partner's needs in situations in which partners' sexual needs and interests *differ*. Results of a three-week dyadic daily experience study of community couples showed that even on days when people reported lower sexual desire than their romantic partner, those high in sexual communal strength indicated that they would be more willing to engage in sex and reported increased sexual and relationship satisfaction when they did engage in sex, relative to less communal people (Day, Muise, Joel, & Impett, 2015). This was accounted for by the fact that people high in sexual communal strength were more motivated to pursue benefits for their partner and the relationship and less motivated to avoid the costs to the self of engaging in sex. Most strikingly, people high in sexual communal strength remained satisfied even on days when they engaged in sex, but their desire was lower than their partner's desire. Whereas less communal people experienced lower sexual satisfaction on days when they engaged in sex but were not in the mood compared with days when both partners experienced similarly high levels of sexual desire, people high in sexual communal strength felt equally sexually satisfied on days when their desire was similar to their partner's desire and on days when they were less sexually enthused than their partner (Day et al., 2015). These results are important because they show that communal people do give and benefit from giving not only when it is easy but also when it is relatively more difficult, such as when people experience low sexual desire.

One unique consideration when applying theories of communal motivation to the domain of sexuality is that engaging in sex when it is not personally desired may be thought of differently than making other types of relationship sacrifices, such as going to a partner's preferred restaurant instead of one's own or attending a partner's work function when one would rather stay home and relax. In the domain of sexuality, it is important to draw a clear distinction between communally motivated, autonomous sexual decision-making and sexual coercion.

Here, we want to point out that our work in this area focuses on sexual motivation in consensual but sometimes undesired, sexual encounters in the absence of explicit or immediate partner pressure (Impett & Peplau, 2003; Katz & Tirone, 2008; O'Sullivan & Allgeier, 1998). While engaging in consensual, undesired sex has the potential to be associated with negative consequences such as reduced relationship satisfaction, especially when people – particularly women – engage in sex to avoid relationship conflict (Katz & Tirone, 2008), engaging in consensual, undesired sex also has the potential to strengthen intimacy in relationships (Impett & Peplau, 2003). In the absence of explicit pressure by a romantic partner or fear of a partner's rejection or abandonment, engaging in sex to provide a partner with benefits can create unique opportunities for partners to express love, enhance intimacy, and build trust in their relationship.

Distinguishing Sexual Communal Strength from Other Perspectives

One important question about sexual communal strength is whether it can be distinguished from communal motivation more broadly. That is, is it necessary to assess sexual communal strength specifically? As we mentioned above, sexuality is a unique domain of relationships – one that is often exclusive (i.e., the majority of relationships are sexually monogamous; Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004), meaning that partners cannot get their sexual needs met outside of the relationship like they may be able to with other needs. Sexuality is also a key factor that shapes people's overall feelings of relationship quality (Impett et al., 2014). In fact, although sexual communal strength and general communal strength are significantly correlated ($r = .45, p < .001$; Muise & Impett, 2015) and people higher in general communal strength report higher relationship satisfaction (Kogan et al., 2010), when general communal strength is controlled, all of the associations between sexual communal strength and relationship quality remain significant (Muise & Impett, 2015). This suggests that people's motivation to meet their partner's sexual needs specifically is associated with both partner's relationship quality, *above and beyond* their motivation to meet their partner's needs more generally.

In work on communal motivation more broadly, communal relationships have been contrasted with exchange relationships – where benefits are given with the expectation of receiving a comparable benefit in return (or in response to benefits received in the past) (Clark & Mills, 2012) – but this theory of exchange relationships has not yet been applied to sexual relationships. Other types of exchange perspectives, however, have been applied to sexuality. The Interpersonal Exchange Model of Sexual Satisfaction (IEMSS; see review by Byers & Wang, 2004) has shown that people tend to be the most sexually satisfied when they experience high sexual rewards (e.g., feeling closer to a partner), experience fewer sexual costs (e.g., engaging in sexual activities that one does not enjoy), and perceive that both partners are relatively equal in sexual rewards and costs (Lawrance & Byers, 1995). The IEMSS perspective differs from the communal-exchange perspective since it is focused on the balance of sexual rewards and costs for both partners (i.e., are both partners experiencing equitable sexual costs and rewards?), whereas sexual exchange perspectives would focus on tracking and trading sexual benefits between partners or trading sex for other benefits in the relationship.

In addition, Baumeister and Vohs (2004) propose a theory of sexual economics that applies exchange theory to sexual interactions in heterosexual relationships. This theory suggests that, because men typically have higher sexual desire than women, sex is a female resource that can be exchanged for other resources. As such, one motive for engaging in sex may be to receive something of comparable value in return. For example, a woman provides a man with sex, and in exchange, he provides the woman with money (or something of value) or emotional investment. Currently, this theory is focused on early relationship negotiation, when people are single or in the early stages of a relationship, and it is not clear how it extends to long-term

relationships or to feelings of desire or satisfaction, but considering how exchange goals for sex are associated with sexual and relationship well-being in established couples is an important avenue for future research.

Broadening Our View of Sexual Needs

In our work on sexual communal motivation, not only we have focused primarily on the need to have sex – that is, to have sex more frequently or to engage in certain sexual activities – but also we think that it is important to balance the desire to meet a partner's sexual needs with one's own needs. Our findings about the benefits of being communally motivated to meet a partner's needs are not meant to suggest that partners should *always* be willing to meet one another's sexual needs. People who are communally oriented not only are motivated to meet the needs of their partner but also hope and expect that their partner will be similarly motivated to meet their *own* needs. Although the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs can be beneficial for both partners, the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs to the *exclusion* of one's own needs is unlikely to be beneficial for either partner in the relationship. Indeed, research on unmitigated communion (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998a) – the tendency to give to others without concern for one's own needs – has shown that individuals high in unmitigated communion experience more negative affect and less positive affect in situations of interpersonal conflict (Nagurney, 2007). In essence, people higher in unmitigated communion take the value of interpersonal connectedness to an unhealthy extreme, prioritizing the needs of others while neglecting their own psychological and physical well-being (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998b). Whereas giving communally (with care for a partner's welfare) is beneficial for the self and the relationship, if a person's care for others is not mitigated by his or her own agency, he or she reports poorer psychological and social outcomes (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998a).

Recently, we have extended the theories of unmitigated communion to the domain of sexuality to show that whereas people who are high in sexual communal strength and their partners report higher relationship and sexual satisfaction, people high in *unmitigated sexual communion* (e.g., people who indicate that they cannot sleep if they do not meet their partner's sexual needs) and their partners do not reap these sexual or relationship benefits and, in some cases, report more negative sexual experiences (Muise & Impett, 2014). In a recent study with a clinical sample of couples where the woman experiences pain during sex, we found that on days when women and their partner reported higher sexual communal strength, both partners reported greater sexual and relationship satisfaction and better sexual function, whereas on days when women reported higher unmitigated sexual communion, both partners reported lower satisfaction and poorer sexual function (Muise, Rosen, Impett, & Bergeron, in preparation). These findings suggest that even though women high in unmitigated sexual communion report being solely focused on meeting their partner's sexual needs, the partners are not benefitting from their hypervigilance to their sexual needs and, in fact, it is detracting from their satisfaction.

This initial work on unmitigated sexual communion suggests that, in the context of ongoing romantic relationships, it may be especially important to strike the right balance between being responsive to a partner's sexual needs and asserting one's own needs. One of the reasons why people high in unmitigated communion seem to report poorer psychological well-being is because they have difficulty with self-disclosure and discomfort receiving support (Helgeson & Fritz, 2000). It is not yet clear whether the partners of people high in unmitigated communion are, in fact, unresponsive or they are just perceived as being unresponsive by those high in unmitigated communion. But, the work on unmitigated communion does suggest the importance of both expressing your own needs and conveying to a partner that you are interested in learning about and responding to his or her needs.

All of the existing research on sexual communal motivation to date has focused on the relationship and sexual outcomes when people *engage* in sex. Having high sexual communal strength means sometimes prioritizing your partner's sexual needs over your own. At times, this might mean having sex with your partner when you are not entirely in the mood, but other times, it might mean respectfully understanding when your partner is not in the mood for sex, even if you are. Almost all of the existing work on sex and relationships has focused on what happens when people *do* have sex, and almost none of it has looked at what happens when people *do not* have sex – and if there are communal ways of rejecting a partner and responding to rejection that can help couples preserve intimacy. Although research has demonstrated that sexual rejection tends to be associated with negative relationship outcomes such as lower sexual satisfaction (Byers & Heinlein, 1989), there is currently very little research investigating how and why people decline their partner's sexual advances, as well as whether some ways of delivering sexual rejection are better able to preserve relationship closeness. In our ongoing research on sexual rejection, we have found that when people reject their partner's sexual advances in reassuring ways, such as affirming their attraction for their partner or offering other forms of affection, their partners are able to maintain feelings of relationship satisfaction compared with when they reject their partner in other ways, such as ignoring their partner or criticizing the way sex was initiated (Kim, Muise, & Impett, 2015).

Implications and Future Directions

Given the benefits of being communally oriented in the domain of sexuality, we have begun to explore whether sexual communal motivation is malleable and can be enhanced to the ultimate benefit of relationships. We see sexual communal strength as an individual difference or relationship variable that is fairly stable over time (Muise et al., 2013), but we have also demonstrated that the extent to which people engage in sex to meet their partner's needs fluctuates at the daily level (Muise et al., in preparation) and that is possible to, at least temporarily, enhance people's motivation to meet their partner's sexual needs (Day et al., 2015). In a recent study, when we asked people to write about their partner's sexual needs and how they might meet these needs, they were more likely than a control group, who were not asked to think about their partner's needs, to report being motivated to engage in sex with their partner in situations where their partner desired sex but their own personal desire for sex was low. Specifically, people who were oriented toward thinking about meeting their partner's needs reported that they would experience greater sexual and relationship satisfaction when engaging in sex with their partner at a time when they have low sexual desire (Day et al., 2015). This study is limited by the use of scenarios, and it is certainly challenging to experimentally manipulate sexual situations in the context of actual romantic relationships (Loewenstein, Krishnamurti, Kopsic, & McDonald, 2015). One promising possibility is to provide couples with information about the benefits of focusing on meeting their partner's sexual needs to determine if this knowledge would positively impact their own sexual lives. Determining whether it is possible to enhance people's communal motivation has important implications for improving couples' sexual relationships and for establishing novel targets of intervention in sex and couples therapy (Brotto, Bitzer, Laan, Leiblum, & Luria, 2010; Rosen, Rancourt, Corsini-Munt & Bergeron, 2013).

Similarly, future research would benefit from exploring the trajectory of sexual communal motivation over time. We suspect that, similar to constructs such as romantic attachment (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Fraley, 2002), people develop communal attitudes from their early familial experiences, but that communal motivation can also develop and change as a result of experiences in adult romantic relationships. It is also possible that sexual communal motivation changes over the course of a relationship and as result of relationship transitions, such

as the transition to marriage or the transition to parenthood. Research on general communal motivation suggests that although people report that communal norms are ideal to follow in long-term relationships, couples tend to adopt more exchange norms following the transition to marriage (Clark et al., 2010). It is possible that this is the result of having to navigate more shared household tasks and co-parenting responsibilities as a relationship progresses, which may make people rely more on notions of equity and tracking and trading so tasks are divided evenly. It is not yet known, however, how sexual communal and exchange norms develop and change over time, but this is a worthwhile avenue for future research.

A communal approach to sexual relationships is novel and gives rise to several important directions for future research. In the future, researchers could explore the strategies that allow couples to manage sexual disagreements most successfully. One promising direction for this line of inquiry involves interviewing desire-discrepant couples who are both struggling and thriving to determine which strategies preserve as opposed to detract from relationship intimacy. Two of the most commonly reported strategies used by women to modulate sexual desire (i.e., enhance their own desire or manage desire discrepancies with a partner) reported in a recent study were enhancing communication and trying to meet their partner's needs (Herbenick, Mullinax, & Mark, 2014). The clinical literature on marriage has also shown that a combination of compromise and acceptance can help distressed couples improve their relationship satisfaction (Jacobson, Christensen, Prince, Cordova, & Eldridge, 2000). Applied to the sexual domain of relationships, romantic couples may aim to make changes to their sex life based on each other's sexual preferences or desired sexual frequency, when reasonable, in order to reach a compromise. Possible changes may include engaging in sexual activities that one partner enjoys but are not the other partner's preferred activity or compromising on how frequently the couple engages in sex by pursuing sex at a frequency that is somewhere in between partners' desired frequency. At the same time, however, partners may also aim to accept the things that the other person is not willing to change. For example, if one partner is interested in a specific sexual activity but his or her partner does not feel comfortable, they may have to accept that this activity will not be part of their sexual relationship.

Another important avenue for future research is to understand how people manage unmet sexual needs. In a new line of research, *sexual nostalgia* or fantasizing about a past sexual partner is shown to be one way that people respond to sexual "dry spells" – periods of time when they report sexual dissatisfaction with a current partner or when they are without a sexual partner. Particularly for people who are securely attached in their relationship (i.e., are comfortable with closeness), nostalgic sexual fantasies are heightened in response to feelings of sexual disconnection in a relationship as well as when people are single (Muisse & MacDonald, 2015). Wistful memories of a past sexual relationship seem to help people cope with periods of sexual dissatisfaction; sexual nostalgia is associated with greater sexual esteem, a stronger sense of one's sexual self and optimism for one's sexual future, and may help to maintain a person's sexual confidence during sexual dry spells. This is one novel approach to understanding responses to unmet sexual needs that would benefit from further exploration.

Another approach is to think about unmet sexual needs as inevitable in long-term relationships in the sense that a person is likely unable to fulfill all of his or her partner's sexual needs in a relationship. One possible reason for declines in relationship quality over time in long-term relationships is that romantic partners may be relying too heavily on each other to fulfill their needs without investing sufficient resources in the relationship to make this possible (Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014). Conley and Moors (2014) suggest that some couples may benefit from employing the principles of consensually non-monogamous (CNM) or polyamorous relationships. These ideas involve multiple aspects such as: removing the expectations that one person (i.e., a romantic partner) will meet *all* of one's needs; anticipating that sexual desire and

attraction to one's partner will waver at times over the course of a long-term relationship; understanding that having multiple loving relationships (whether these are romantic or sexual relationships or not) can be healthy and beneficial; communicating with your partner (or partners) in an open and honest way; and making time to talk about your relationship. It is important to point out that Conley and Moors are not suggesting that everyone should pursue a CNM relationship; instead, they suggest that both researchers and couples may learn strategies from polyamorous relationships that can help to revive romantic partnerships over time. For some couples, this may mean discussing and re-evaluating the terms of their monogamous commitment regularly. For other couples, this may mean accepting attractions to and sexual fantasies about others. For other couples, it may be learning from CNM couples who are likely to have addressed complicated issues in their relationships and studying how CNM couples manage conflict that might present useful strategies for monogamous couples as well. These ideas are ripe for empirical investigation.

Conclusions

The common discourse in both popular media and research literature focuses on individual factors that contribute to the maintenance (or decline) of desire over time in relationships. These perspectives tend to suggest that greater comfort with one's sexuality or the right sexual technique or accouterment can help reignite a couple's sexual spark. While there are merits to examining individual-focused correlates of sexual desire and satisfaction, our novel approach to the maintenance of sexual relationships over time suggests that looking beyond the self and considering a partner's sexual needs in relationships are ways to maintain sexual desire and have more satisfying sexual experiences. Applying communal theories to sexual relationships demonstrates that the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs, out of a genuine desire to promote a partner's pleasure and satisfaction, is one route to weathering periods of sexual dissatisfaction and keeping the sexual spark alive over time.

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Short Biographies

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