



# The sexing of relationship science: Impetus for the special issue on sex and relationships

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Two decades ago, in an award address given at the American Psychological Association conference and a corresponding article in *American Psychologist*, Ellen Berscheid documented the emergence or *greening* of relationship science—a science which she argued held enormous potential for understanding “the very best thing in life” (Berscheid, 1999, p. 260). Indeed, when asked to consider what makes their lives meaningful, no other factor emerges more consistently and prominently than close, satisfying relationships (Berscheid & Reis, 1998), and meta-analyses have documented that having high quality, supportive relationships is an equal or stronger predictor of mortality than other known health risk factors such as smoking, physical activity, and body mass index (Holt-Lunstad, Smith, & Layton, 2010).

One decade ago, Harry Reis argued that in order for relationship science to *ripen*, the field had to demonstrate how, why and through what processes relationships predict health and well-being (Reis, 2007). Since this time, relationship researchers have accepted this challenge. A growing body of research now shows that supportive, close relationships promote health and well-being because they help people cope with stress and enable them to fulfill basic needs for social connection, intimacy, and companionship (see review by Pietromonaco & Collins, 2017). One factor which has been surprisingly absent from the growing literature on how romantic relationships influence health and well-being is the role of sexuality. This omission is striking given that sexuality is arguably a key factor that distinguishes romantic relationships from other

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types of close relationships (Schwartz & Young, 2009) and sexual satisfaction is strongly linked to overall relationship satisfaction (see reviews by Impett, Muise, & Peragine, 2014; Muise, Kim, McNulty, & Impett, 2016). In North America, more people see a happy sexual relationship as very important for a successful relationship (70%) than having an adequate income (53%) or having shared interests (46%) (Taylor, Funk, & Clark, 2007). Further, in a multinational study conducted in 29 countries, the people who were the most sexually satisfied were the most satisfied with their lives in general (Laumann et al., 2006).

Despite the key role of sexuality in the maintenance and quality of romantic relationships, historically, sexuality research and relationship science have developed as two distinct research traditions—each with their own journals, professional organizations, and academic conferences—and there has been very little cross talk between sexuality and relationship scholars (Dewitte, 2014). In 2010, Lisa Diamond presented two talks—one at the International Academy of Sex Research (Diamond, 2010a) and the other at the International Association for Relationship Research (Diamond, 2010b)—in which she lamented the relative absence of research at the intersection of sexuality and relationships and called for what she hoped would be a merger of the two disciplines. There were certainly researchers working at the intersection of these two disciplines prior to this time, many of whom Diamond mentioned in her talks and provided inspiration for the research that was to follow, including the articles in this special issue.

We know many people who attended one—but not both—of these talks. In fact during her presentations, Diamond polled the audience to determine how many people had attended or were planning to attend both conferences. As she suspected, only a handful of hands were raised. We also know that these talks have made a lasting impression on relationship and sexual scientists, including ourselves. Since that time, we have noticed a distinct shift in which relationship scientists are taking more seriously the idea that sexuality is key to relationship maintenance, and sexuality scholars are examining the role of interpersonal factors in shaping important sexuality outcomes. We have noticed an increasing number of theoretically rich and methodologically rigorous papers on many aspects of sexuality—including sexual behavior, sexual satisfaction, sexual motivation, sexual interests, attitudes, and desire—published in journals devoted to relationship science and psychology more broadly (see review by Muise, Maxwell, & Impett, in press). We have also noticed an increased number of presentations given at sexuality conferences that more prominently feature relationship processes and the key role of the interpersonal context in shaping sexuality outcomes. Given these recent changes, we thought that the time is ripe to take stock of what we are learning from the burgeoning overlap between relationship and sexual science.

This new area of inquiry—what we are ambitiously calling the *sexing of relationship science*—is nascent but vibrant and growing, as reflected in the 56 abstract submissions we received for this special issue. The number and quality of these submissions was staggering—so staggering, in fact, that we invited double the number of papers we originally intended to publish by requesting that some authors submit their articles in short report form. Our impetus for publishing this special issue was to showcase the breadth and diversity of topics, theories and methods used to study interesting questions at the intersection of sexuality and relationships—for example, questions about the ways

that partners signal interest or disinterest in sex, how motivations for sex shape sexual outcomes, the individual difference factors that predict sexual interest, sexual fantasies, and infidelity, and how people understand and make attributions for sexual issues they face in their relationship.

These questions are informed by a diversity of theoretical perspectives. With the exception of one paper contributed by sociologists, all of the articles in this special issue were contributed by social (or social-personality) and clinical psychologists, yet there were a variety of theories which informed their work including attachment theory, self-determination theory, attribution theory, approach-avoidance motivation theory, Big Five personality, error management theory, and theories of intimacy and responsiveness in psychology. Another key contribution of several of the articles is challenging commonly held assumptions about people involved in particular types of relationships or engaged in particular sexual practices. Two articles (Conley, Piemonte, Gusakovam, and Rubin; Wood, Desmarais, Burleigh, and Milhausen) present evidence challenging lay beliefs that people in consensually nonmonogamous (CNM) relationships are less satisfied with their sex lives and relationships than people in monogamous relationships. In another article, Kohut, Balzarini, Fisher, and Campbell report findings challenging the pervasive view that pornography use is associated with negative outcomes in romantic relationships, and instead demonstrate that, in certain contexts, such as when partners engage in shared use, pornography use is associated with positive relational and sexual outcomes. In addition, de Jong, Adams, and Reis challenge the idea that casual sexual encounters (i.e., hookups) have negative consequences for women, and instead demonstrate that women's emotional reactions to hookups are a mixture of both positive and negative emotions, and that women's motives for engaging in hookups are important for their feelings about the encounter and their sexual satisfaction. The samples used to investigate these questions are diverse, including samples of individuals in young adulthood and older adulthood, individuals in CNM and monogamous relationships, community samples of couples (including couples recruited outside of North America, couples from a nationally representative survey in the United States), and a sample of first-time mothers. The samples are also international in scope and drawn from the United States, Canada, Israel, and the Netherlands.

Several of the articles capture relevant aspects of sexual interest and motivation, including people's intrinsic versus extrinsic motivations for pursuing sex, approach versus avoidance motivations, as well as predictors of sexual interest in older adulthood. De Jong, Adams, and Reis showed that young adult women's motivations for hooking up measured prior to hookup experiences, as well as how well they feel these motivations are satisfied, impact women's emotions after these interactions play out. Wood, Desmarais, Burleigh, and Milhausen found that people's motivations for engaging in sex similarly impact their relationship and sexual satisfaction for people involved in CNM versus monogamous relationships, although people involved in CNM relationships report engaging in sex for more personal intrinsic motives than those in monogamous relationships. Iveniuk and Waite showed that key psychological and social factors (e.g., openness, larger family networks) predict increased sexual interest in older adulthood in a nationally representative study of couples in the United States.

In addition to capturing sexual motivation and interest, several of the papers focused on sexual thoughts and perceptions including accuracy in detecting a partner's interest,

frequency of dyadic sexual fantasizing, overall evaluations of one's sexual relationship, and women's causal attributions for postpartum sexual concerns. Dobson, Campbell, and Stanton demonstrated that people are reasonably accurate in detecting the specific behaviors that their romantic partners use to signal sexual interest, although men tended to underestimate their partner's sexual interest. Mizrahi, Kanat-Maymon, and Birnbaum found that daily increases in attachment insecurity (high attachment anxiety or avoidance) were associated with lower perceptions of a romantic partner's responsiveness, which in turn predicted a lower frequency of dyadic sexual fantasizing. Conley, Piemonte, Gusakovam, and Rubin found that while people engaged in CNM and monogamous relationships did not differ in their overall evaluations of their relationship satisfaction, monogamous people reported slightly lower sexual satisfaction and rates of orgasm than those in CNM relationships. In a sample of first-time mothers, Vannier, Adare, and Rosen found that when new mothers were less sexually satisfied they made more stable and partner attributions for sexual concerns, and were less satisfied with their relationship when they attributed greater responsibility for sexual concerns to their partners.

Finally, several articles were concerned with understanding aspects of romantic partners' sexual behaviors including infidelity, the use of pornography, and sexual rejection behaviors. Altgelt, Reyes, French, Meltzer, and McNulty showed that specific Big Five personality traits measured among newlywed couples (e.g., wives high in extroversion, and husbands and wives with partners high in neuroticism and extroversion) predicted a greater likelihood of engaging in infidelity 3 years later. Kim, Muise, and Impett found that declining or rejecting a partner's advances in ways that communicate reassurance of love and attraction represent a viable alternative to engaging in sex when avoidance goals are high. Kohut, Balzarini, Fisher, and Campbell found that couples in which partners are discordant in their solitary use of pornography report more inhibited communication and lower closeness compared to couples where the partners are concordant in their solitary use and couples who engaged in shared pornography use. Finally, van Lankveld, Jacobs, Thewissen, Dewitte, and Verboon found that increases in emotional intimacy among romantic partners in daily life are associated with increased sexual desire, which in turn, is associated with a higher likelihood of the couple engaging in sex.

These articles in this special issue also showcase the diverse methodological approaches taken to investigate questions at the overlap of sexuality and relationship science, including cross-sectional studies, studies comparing people in different types of relationships (i.e., CNM and monogamous individuals), intensive experience sampling methods, and longitudinal methods in which couples are followed for several years over time. Notably, slightly over half of the papers include dyadic data. The vast majority of sexual experiences occur in the context of romantic relationships (see review by Willetts, Sprecher, & Beck, 2004) and involve (at least) two people who influence each other and interact in many contexts and in different roles over time. Yet a great deal of research on sexuality and relationships has tended to focus on only one partner (DeLamater & Hyde, 2004; Reis, Aron, Clark, & Finkel, 2013; Wiederman, 2004). In the past several decades, key methodological developments and advances in statistical analysis have enabled researchers to ask—as well as answer—more nuanced questions that take into account the influence that partners in a relationship have on each other. As it becomes more

accessible to recruit and analyze data from multiple partners, we hope that researchers will obtain reports from more than two partners in a relationship—when relevant, such as for samples of people in CNM relationships—to further extend the theory on diverse relationship structures.

It is interesting that—out of the 11 articles included in this special issue—only one employed experimental methods. We are not surprised by the relative lack of experimental methods in the articles given that private, intimate sexual interactions do not always translate well to laboratory or experimental settings (and indeed, the experiment conducted by Kim, Muise, and Impett relied on the use of hypothetical scenarios). Findings from a recent study highlight the challenges in conducting experimental research on sexuality in long-term romantic relationships. Loewenstein, Krishnamurti, Kopsic, and McDonald (2015) found that couples who were asked to double their sexual frequency did not report increased happiness, as compared to those given no instructions to change their sexual frequency, possibly because being given the directive to increase sexual frequency reduced intrinsic motivation and therefore made sex less enjoyable. We think that ecologically valid methods, including many of those employed in this special issue, such as methods in which couples report on their experiences as they go about their daily lives or over a longer period of time in relationships, hold the most promise for understanding couples' real life sexual interactions and the ebbs and flows in sexual motivation, cognition, and behavior over time.

Despite the huge amount of progress that has been made in studying topics at the intersection of sexuality and relationships, there is still a lot of work to be done. As Diamond (2013) lamented, we are lacking descriptive research devoted to understanding and documenting couples' regular sexual interactions, including how couples negotiate and make decisions about the sexual activities in which they will engage, the manner in which they signal or initiate sexual interest, the days and times when sex typically occurs, and the flexibility in their sexual routine. Studies that seek to inform these questions as well as apply established theoretical perspectives to understand when and for whom certain practices might be beneficial for relationships as well as the effectiveness of the strategies couples use to negotiate their sexual relationships represent important future directions. In addition, future work that provides insights into how sexual interest and behavior change over time and during important transitional periods would be especially fruitful. Answering these questions may also involve drawing on more diverse, multidisciplinary perspectives. In this special issue, the articles are heavily grounded in theories from psychology, but perspectives from other disciplines such as sociology, health behavior, and communications could provide novel insights.

While several of the articles included in this special issue focused on specific sexual behaviors such as the use of pornography or the specific behavioral ways partners can signal sexual interest or disinterest, relationship researchers have rarely measured explicit sexual practices (perhaps due to discomfort), and have instead favored almost exclusively global measures of sexual satisfaction and desire (Diamond, 2013). Consequently, relationship researchers have been missing out on important opportunities to study more nuanced sexual relationship issues such as the use of sex toys and interest in less normative sexual activities. By asking participants about their interest or engagement in nonnormative sexual behaviors, relationship researchers can ensure a wider

range of people feel that their sexual experiences and interests are represented by relationship research and will allow relationship researchers to gain a more complete understanding of couples' sexual lives.

Relationship researchers who study sexuality could also do more to study more diverse types of relationships. This special issue features two studies of CNM relationships (and some of these individuals do identify as nonheterosexual), but there are no studies that include targeted recruitment of same-sex couples represented in this special issue (although two of the dyadic samples included same-sex couples). Many theories of sexuality in close relationships are heterocentric (DeLamater & Hyde, 2004), presuming heterosexuality is the norm (Rose, 2000) and focusing on men and women in monogamous heterosexual relationships. Both informal (Blair, 2014) and systematic reviews (Andersen & Zou, 2015) suggest that relationship research regularly neglects non-heterosexual individuals. Relationship researchers can move toward greater inclusivity in their research by taking relatively simple steps such as ensuring study recruitment materials are inclusive of sexual minorities and diverse relationship configurations, and asking, rather than assuming, participants' gender identity and sexual orientation (Andersen & Zou, 2015; Blair, 2014).

In closing, we would like to thank the 63 authors, reviewers, and editors who played a part in this special issue. For their contributions, we are immensely grateful. This dedication by such a large number of scholars bodes well for the future of sexuality and relationship science. We hope that the empirically and theoretically rich articles represented in this special issue serve as continued inspiration for a fruitful sexing—and further ripening—of relationship science.

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