

Relationships and Sexuality: You Reap What You Sow in the Bedroom

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"Life is garden; you reap what you sow."

~ Paulo Coelho

Communal motivation, defined as care and concern for the welfare of others (see review by (Clark & Mills, 2012), lies at the heart of building close and trusting interpersonal relationships. In order to promote positive outcomes in their relationships, people are motivated to meet their partners' needs and desire partners who do the same. For instance, parents who are communally motivated report being highly responsive to their children's needs (Le & Impett, 2015); friends and romantic partners rely on mutual communal motivation as a source of intimacy and support (Mills, Clark, Ford, & Johnson, 2004); and communal motivation for acquaintances or strangers can be a means of providing care to those who may need it most (Bryan, Hammer, & Fisher, 2000). A growing body of work, drawing upon and building on this communal perspective, has shown that people can experience profound personal rewards from giving to others, even when doing so comes at considerable cost to the self (see reviews by (Day & Impett, 2016; Le, Impett, Lemay, Muise, & Tskhay, 2018).

In the current chapter, we present a *communal perspective on sexuality* (Impett, Muise, & Rosen, 2015; Muise & Impett, 2016) to advance the argument that people who focus on giving pleasure to their partner can experience profound rewards for the self—that is, people can reap what they sow in the bedroom. We suggest that people who are communally motivated to provide each other with sexual pleasure and satisfaction not only have partners who reap benefits, but are also likely to experience benefits themselves (Muise & Impett, 2015; Muise, Impett, Desmarais, & Kogan, 2013). For example, focusing on

giving a partner pleasure enables people to maintain their own sexual desire, even over the long term, and helps them to navigate sexual problems in their relationships with greater success. This article addresses two central questions, including who is most likely to be giving in the bedroom and what are the sexual and relationship benefits of doing so.

The Importance of Sexuality 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). Satisfying and pleasurable sexual interactions contribute to both relationship and life satisfaction (Impett, Muise, & Brienes, 2013; Impett et al., 2014; Muise, Kim, et al., 2016). In both dating and married couples and across the lifespan, people's satisfaction with their sex lives is closely linked with their feelings of satisfaction with their relationship as a whole (Brezsnyak & Whisman, 2004; Byers, 2005; McNulty, Wenner, & Fisher, 2015; Sprecher, 2002). Further, couples who enjoy positive, satisfying sexual relationships have longer lasting relationships than couples who are less sexually satisfied or who report experiencing sexual problems (Edwards & Booth, 1994; Sprecher, 2002).

Despite the importance of sex for relationships, couples face numerous challenges to having and maintaining a satisfying sexual relationship. Ironically, while powerful feelings of sexual attraction are often what motivate people to initiate romantic relationships (Diamond, 2004; Gonzaga, Turner, Keltner, Campos, & Altemus, 2006), these initial feelings frequently diminish over time. Empirical research reveals that sexual desire tends to peak in the beginning stages of romantic relationships as partners are getting to know each other and intimacy is rapidly developing (Baumeister & Bratslavsky, 1999), and then tends to decline over time as partners become more secure and comfortable in the relationship

(Impett et al., 2014; Simms & Meana, 2010). Sexual satisfaction shows a similar trajectory (Edwards & Booth, 1994; Liu, 2003; McNulty & Widman, 2013): While couples begin their relationships quite satisfied with their sex lives, sexual satisfaction steadily declines, in one study beginning at about a year into the relationship (Schmiedeberg & Schröder, 2016). As a result, romantic partners will inevitably encounter times when their sexual interests differ (Davies, Katz, & Jackson, 1999; Impett & Peplau, 2003; Mark, 2012; Mark & Murray, 2012). For example, couples may disagree about when and how frequently to engage in sex or the specific activities in which they wish to engage. In a national study of couples married fewer than five years, disagreements about sexual frequency were one of the top three most cited arguments (Risch, Riley, & Lawler, 2003). Research has also shown that it is common for one partner to experience chronically higher levels of sexual desire than the other partner (Davies et al., 1999; Mark, 2012) and that partners in ongoing romantic relationships experience at least some degree of discrepancy in sexual desire on five out of seven days per week (Day, Muise, Joel, & Impett, 2015). These sexual conflicts and discrepancies in sexual interest, if left unresolved, have the potential to create lasting tension in romantic relationships (Call, Sprecher, & Schwartz, 1995; Sprecher, 2002; Yabiku & Gager, 2009). Not surprisingly, conflicts of interest about sex are one of the most common reasons why couples seek marital therapy (Rosen, 2000), and sexual disagreements are among the most difficult types of conflict to successfully resolve (Sanford, 2003).

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 in their

romantic relationships. Indeed, while sexual desire and frequency are known to decline over the course of relationships (Call et al., 1995; Simms & Meana, 2010), not all couples experience these declines (Acevedo & Aron, 2009), and not everyone experiences accompanying declines in relationship satisfaction (Simms & Meana, 2010). Even for the many romantic partners who experience discrepancies in sexual desire, some are able to maintain relationship and sexual satisfaction in the face of these difficulties (Apt, Huribert, Pierce, & White, 1996; Bridges & Horne, 2007; Maxwell et al., 2017; Smith & Pukall, 2011). When couples can successfully navigate sexual issues and maintain a strong sexual connection, closeness and intimacy in the relationship can be strengthened (Rehman et al., 2011).

A Communal Perspective on Relationships

A communal perspective on sexuality provides insight into how some couples are able to stave off declines in sexual desire or remain satisfied in spite of partners experiencing differences in their sexual appetites and interests. At the core of this perspective is the idea that romantic partners are dependent on each other to meet their sexual needs. 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 (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004) and therefore partners 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 (Impett et al., 2015). 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 (Muise et al., 2013; Muise & Impett, 2015).

Situations in which partners experience conflicting interests—such as when partners experience a discrepancy in their desire for sex—provide important information about people's motivation to pursue their own self-interest versus promote the interests of their partner (Kelley, 2003; Kelley et al., 1983; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). In these situations, interdependence theory, a prominent social psychological theory of close relationships, suggests that a person's first impulse is to pursue their own interests, but that in close relationships, people often transform their motivations from focusing on what is best for themselves to focusing on what is best for their partner or their relationship (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2003, 2008). This enhanced focus on what people can give to their partner as opposed to what they personally have to lose contributes to enhanced relationship satisfaction for the giver and enhanced trust among relationship partners (Van Lange et al., 1997; Wieselquist, Rusbult, Foster, & Agnew, 1999).

Not everyone is motivated to meet their partner's needs, and certainly not across all situations, suggesting that there are important individual differences in the extent to which people are motivated to be responsive to their partner's needs (Mills et al., 2004). Theories of *communal motivation* 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). Romantic partners indicate that following communal norms, as opposed to exchange norms, is ideal in long-term relationships as communal norms 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, 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 noncontingently to a specific partner's needs are referred to as *communal strength* (Mills et al., 2004). 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). Research has shown that people high in communal strength, as compared to those who are lower in communal strength, feel more satisfied when they provide costly care or make sacrifices for relationship partners (Kogan et al., 2010; Le & Impett, 2015).

Recently, theories of communal motivation have been applied to the sexual domain of relationships. *Sexual communal strength* is the extent to which people are motivated to be responsive to their partner's sexual needs (Muisse et al., 2013; Muise & Impett, 2015). Qualitative research has shown that people high in sexual communal strength are more likely to engage in sex with their partner when they are not in the mood, display open-

mindedness about their partner's preferences, communicate with their partner about their sexual likes and dislikes (learn about their partner's preferences and share their own), and ensure that partners are mutually responsive to one another's sexual needs (Muisse & Impett, 2015).

The Benefits of Sexual Communal Motivation

Mounting evidence suggests that people with communally motivated sexual partners do, in fact, report that their partners are more responsive to their needs during sex, and in turn, they report greater satisfaction and commitment (Muisse & Impett, 2015). Additional evidence regarding the benefits of focusing on meeting a partner's sexual needs comes from related research on *sexual transformations* (Burke & Young, 2012). In one study, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they change 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, the extent to which people felt positive about changing their sexual habits for a partner was associated with both partners' relationship satisfaction (Burke & Young, 2012), suggesting that both willingness as well as satisfaction with sexual changes promote increased relationship satisfaction in romantic couples.

In the context of consensually non-monogamous (CNM) relationships—relationships in which all parties agree that it is acceptable to have additional romantic or sexual partners (Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, & Valentine, 2013)—people who perceived their primary partner as more communally motivated to meet their sexual needs reported greater sexual

and relationship satisfaction in both that relationship and in a secondary relationship (Muise, Laughton, Moors, & Impett, 2018). However, there was a gender difference in how a secondary partner's sexual communal motivation was associated with satisfaction in a primary relationship. For men, having a partner who was high in sexual communal motivation was associated with greater relationship satisfaction with a primary partner (this association was not significant for women), and for women, having a communal secondary partner was associated with lower sexual satisfaction with their primary partner (this association was not significant for men). Taken together, these findings suggest that being involved in a sexually communal primary relationship can benefit another relationship in the person's life, but that having one's sexual needs communally responded to in a secondary relationship is more variable in terms of how this impacts a primary relationship. The gender difference in these findings might be due, in part, to people's reasons for seeking out a secondary relationship (i.e., to enhance sexual fulfillment, to compensate for an unsatisfying primary relationship), although future research is needed to investigate this possibility.

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 has also been linked to increased benefits for the *self*. In a sample of long-term couples, sexual communal strength was positively associated with a person's own sexual desire and satisfaction (Muise et al., 2013; Muise & Impett, 2015). Further, whereas people lower in sexual communal strength experienced declines in sexual desire over a period of four months, 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 (Muisse 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 decline with increased relationship duration.

Communally motivated people do not reap these benefits because of underlying self-interested motives, such as to fulfilling their own sexual desires, but instead out of a genuine interest in pleasing and connecting with their partner. 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 engage in sex in pursuit of partner-focused approach goals such as providing their partner with sexual pleasure or promoting intimacy and closeness (Muisse, Impett, & Desmarais, 2013). In turn, partner-focused approach goals were 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 the greatest desire and satisfaction (Muisse, Boudreau, & Rosen, 2016), even compared to 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; (Muisse, Impett, & Desmarais, 2013) which tend to be associated with lower desire and satisfaction in relationships (Muisse, 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 experience personal benefits.

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 et al., 2015). These benefits were 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 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 and reported experiencing lower desire than their partner compared to 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 not just give to a partner in the bedroom and benefit from giving when it is easy, but also when it is relatively more difficult, such as when people experience low sexual desire.

Gender differences in sexual desire, especially in the context of long-term relationships, have been well established (see review by Impett et al., 2014). Consistent with this finding, men often report higher sexual communal strength compared to women (although if sexual desire is controlled, these gender differences are no longer significant). However, the associations between sexual communal strength and desire and satisfaction are largely consistent between men and women, suggesting that sexual communal strength has benefits for both men and women. It is possible however, that men and women express sexual communal motivation in different ways. Since on average, women have lower desire than men, women may be communal by engaging in sex when they are not entirely in the mood, whereas men may more likely to consider the specific activities that their partner is interested in. Future research is needed to test these possibilities.

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 (e.g., 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 the 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, 2009; 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, 2009), 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 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—for both men and women.

The Costs of Not Being Communal

Unfortunately, some people have a personality characteristic—high levels of narcissism—that suggests they are not likely to be communal partners. In many ways, narcissists are the opposite of highly communal people—instead of focusing on meeting their partner's needs, they focus on themselves in their communication, lack empathy, and exploit others for their own gain (Campbell, Foster, & Finkel, 2002). Although theories of narcissism were originally developed in personality psychology (Raskin & Terry, 1988), sexuality has been uniquely linked to narcissism since it was first defined in the psychological literature (Ellis, 1898). More recently, theories of narcissism have been explicitly extended to the sexual domain. *Sexual narcissism* includes four components: sexual exploitation, sexual entitlement, low sexual empathy and high sexual skill (McNulty & Widman, 2013; Widman & McNulty, 2010). Whereas one facet of sexual narcissism—high sexual skill—has been associated with higher sexual and relationship satisfaction as reported by both members of the couple, the other three facets of narcissism—sexual exploitation, sexual entitlement and low sexual empathy—have predicted declines in sexual and relationship satisfaction for both partners over the first five years of marriage (McNulty & Widman, 2013). These findings further highlight just how important it is for people to be

responsive to their partner's needs, given that sexual narcissism detracts from both partners' relationship and sexual satisfaction.

People high in narcissism tend to have a fragile sense of self-esteem, meaning that although they have grandiose views of themselves, their sense of self is easily threatened (Zeigler-Hill, 2006). In three studies, researchers demonstrated that one reason why people high in sexual narcissism are more likely to report lower sexual and relationship satisfaction is because they are more likely to compare their own sex lives to the sex lives of others (Day, Muise, & Impett, 2017). In a series of studies, as compared to those lower in sexual narcissism, people high in sexual narcissism tended to make more comparisons in which they are having more frequent sex than other people and in turn, they reported feeling more satisfied with their sex lives and relationships. However, when people high in sexual narcissism were confronted were led to believe that they were having less frequent sex in their relationship than other people, they reported lower sexual and relationship satisfaction compared to people lower in sexual narcissism (Day et al., 2017). These results suggest that one way that people high in sexual narcissism maintain their grandiose self-views is by believing that they are better sexual partners than other people, and that their sense of self can be threatened when they are confronted with information that suggests they are inferior (i.e., having sex less frequently than others).

Given that, in general, people high in sexual narcissism experience negative consequences in their sex lives and relationships, one important direction for future research is to investigate the factors that might buffer against these consequences or might reduce the destructive tendencies that people high in sexual narcissism display. Research on general narcissism has shown that it is possible to increase narcissists' empathy, at least

temporarily (Hepper, Hart, & Sedikides, 2014), by instructing them to take the perspective of another person. This finding suggests some promise for promoting responsiveness among sexual narcissists as well. Perhaps approaches that enhance people's sexual communal motivation, such as taking a partner's perspective and thinking about a partner's sexual needs (Day et al., 2015), if applied to people high in sexual narcissism, might reduce the self-focused and exploitative approach they tend to have toward sexual relationships. In addition, although research has shown that the partners of sexual narcissists tend to report lower sexual and relationship satisfaction, no research has explored the mechanisms for this association—such as perceiving their partner as unresponsive to their needs—or the role that partners of sexual narcissists could play in increasing the narcissistic partner's sexual responsiveness.

Balancing Sexual Needs in Relationships

The research to date on sexual communal motivation has focused primarily on people's needs to engage in sex and maintain an intimate connection, but it is important to balance the desire to meet a partner's sexual needs with one's own needs. The 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 are not only 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 their own agency, they report poorer psychological and social outcomes (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998a).

Recently, theories of unmitigated communion have been extended to the domain of sexuality, and work in this area has shown 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 (Impett, Muise, & Harasymchuk, in press). In a recent study with a clinical sample of couples in which the woman experiences sexual pain, on days when women and their partners reported higher sexual communal strength, both partners reported greater sexual and relationship satisfaction and better sexual functioning, whereas on days when women reported higher unmitigated sexual communion, both partners reported lower satisfaction and poorer sexual functioning (Muise, Bergeron, Impett, & Rosen, 2017). These findings suggest that even though people high in unmitigated sexual communion report being solely focused on meeting their partner's sexual needs, their partners are not benefiting from

their hyper vigilance to their sexual needs and may, in fact, be even less satisfied with their sex lives and relationships than people who provide more balanced care.

This initial work on unmitigated sexual communion suggests that, in the context of ongoing romantic relationships, it is 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 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 expressing one's own needs, as well as conveying to a partner an interest in learning about and responding to their needs.

While much of the work stemming from a communal perspective on sexuality has focused on what happens when couples engage in sex, recent research has begun to explore what happens when couples *do not* have sex, including how people decline a partner's interest in sex and respond to sexual rejection. Given that it is normative for desire to ebb and flow over time in relationships and partners cannot always be in sync with their sexual interests, people inevitably need to decline or reject their partner's sexual advances. Sexual rejection is common in romantic relationships: in a study of dating relationships, most people reported either declining their partner's sexual advances or having their advances declined at least once per week, and relationship satisfaction was lower when people had their sexual advances declined as opposed to accepted (Byers & Heinlein, 1989). We currently know very little about the *ways* that people reject their partner for sex, or if there

are particular ways of doing so that protect relationship and sexual satisfaction. More research is needed to determine if there are particular sexual rejection behaviors that can more effectively buffer couples against experiencing negative outcomes both in the moment when couples experience rejection and when particular types of rejection are used more chronically over time.

The flip side to delivering sexual rejection is understanding how people respond to or cope with *being rejected*. While it is important to be responsive to a partner's needs when their need is to engage in sex (Muise & Impett, 2016), it is also important to be understanding about a partner's desire to not engage in sex. In a study of couples who were transitioning to parenthood, a time when many couples experience declines in desire and satisfaction and report increased sexual problems (for reviews see (Haugen, Schmutzer, & Wenzel, 2004; Jawed-Wessel & Sevick, 2017), showing understanding about a partner's need not to have sex was just as important for relationship and sexual satisfaction as being responsive to a partner's need to engage in sex. In particular, when new mothers and fathers showed greater understanding of their partner's need not to engage in sex, they felt more satisfied with their sex lives and relationships, and having a partner who was more understanding about the need not to have sex was associated with greater sexual and relationship satisfaction for new mothers (Muise, Kim, Impett, & Rosen, 2017). A full communal perspective on sexuality in romantic relationships requires that we understand how both partners can be buffered against the negative consequences of a partner's lack of interest in sex and possible sexual rejection.

Taken together, we know that there can be profound benefits associated with being a communal sexual partner for a couple's sex life and the relationship, yet at the same time,

it is also important for people to assert and not neglect their own needs. With this as a backdrop, if one partner is interested in sex, but the other partner's desire for sex is low, it might be challenging for the partner with lower desire to decide whether or not to engage in sex. While it is important to approach sex to pursue positive outcomes such as one's own or a partner's pleasure, approach goals are not always high, and sometimes people are motivated to avoid negative outcomes such as conflict in the relationship (Impett et al., 2005; Muise et al., 2013). However, three recent studies have shown that, in the context of long-term romantic relationships, declining a partner in positive, reassuring ways, such as by telling the partner they are still loved and desired, is a viable alternative to engaging in sex reluctantly to avoid conflict in terms of protecting the satisfaction of both partners in the moment when rejection is delivered (Kim, Muise, & Impett, 2018).

Since it can be difficult for the low desire partner to decide whether or not to engage in sex and it might also be difficult for the higher desire partner to express their sexual interests without making their partner feel pressured, how can partners best strike this balance? The clinical literature on marriage has 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.

Future Directions

The communal perspective on sexuality advanced in this article is novel and gives rise to several directions for future research. One future direction is to examine the extent to which communal motivation in the domain of sexuality is malleable and can be enhanced to the ultimate benefit of relationships. Sexual communal strength is an individual difference or relationship variable that has been shown to be fairly stable over time (Muise, Impett, & Desmarais, 2013), but the extent to which people engage in sex to meet their partner's needs also fluctuates at the daily level (Impett et al., in press; Muise, Bergeron, et al., 2017). It is possible to, at least temporarily, enhance people's motivation to meet their partner's sexual needs, although to date this has only been documented in a study relying on hypothetical scenarios (Day et al., 2015). One promising future direction is to provide couples with information about the benefits of meeting their partner's sexual needs to determine if this knowledge would positively impact their own sex lives.

Future research would also benefit from exploring the origins of sexual communal motivation, as well as communal motivation more generally. We suspect that similar to romantic attachment (Eastwick & Finkel, 2008; Fraley, 2002), people develop communal attitudes from their early familial experiences, but also that communal motivation can develop and change as a result of experiences in adult romantic relationships. The strength of people's sexual communal motivation may also change over the course of a relationship and as result of relationship transitions, such as the transition to marriage or 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 more focused on equity and more likely to track and trade to ensure that tasks are divided evenly. It is not yet known how sexual communal and exchange norms develop and change over time, but this is a worthwhile avenue for future research.

Conclusion

The successful maintenance of long-term romantic relationships requires that partners provide each other with support and maintain their connection, but a unique aspect of romantic relationships is that partners are also expected to provide each other with *sexual* connection and fulfillment. In today's world, it has been argued that people expect more from their romantic relationships than ever before (Finkel, Hui, Carswell, & Larson, 2014), including having the expectation that their partner will provide them with continued sexual fulfillment. The work reviewed in this chapter suggests that one key way to sexual and relationship fulfillment is to be giving in the bedroom. The growing body of research on communal motivation in the domain of sexuality suggests that, just like in life more generally, partners can ultimately reap what they sow in the bedroom.

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