Satisfaction with Sex Life Among Middle-Aged Adults

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Abstract

In this study we examined the sexual satisfaction among middle-aged adults. The aim of this research was to identify whether there were differences in the satisfaction with sex life according to certain background characteristics. The second objective was to study the relationships between sexual satisfaction and other relational constructs. Participants numbered 193 with a mean age of 51.64. Scores from the SWLS have favorable psychometric properties among which Cronbach's alpha was 0.89. As expected no gender differences regarding the satisfaction with sex life were found. Characteristics indicative of the quality of a relationship (Eros, commitment, sexual desire, and warmth) were related to the level of sexual satisfaction. Measures of well-being (satisfaction, life satisfaction, and self-esteem) were also related to sex life satisfaction. Suggestions concerning the use of the SWLS for research and clinical purposes are offered.

Keywords: Satisfaction, sex, well-being.

Introduction

Sex life satisfaction is particularly important for researchers of intimate relations (Goudwin, 2009) for two reasons. First, sexual satisfaction provides one mechanism through which to view a relationship's partner. Second, sexual satisfaction is a construct that lends itself to prediction by a variety of other relationships phenomena (e.g., marital quality and stability). Furthermore, the domain of sex is very important for peoples' lives. The satisfaction experienced in this domain can have repercussions on the whole life. Satisfaction with sex life can be defined as a global evaluation by the person of his or her sex life. It appears that individuals construct a standard, which they perceive as appropriate for themselves, and compare the circumstances of their sex life to that standard. Hence, this is a subjective judgment, rather than a judgment based on some externally imposed objective standard (Derner et al., 1999). This area of life is common and, furthermore, appears to be a critical domain of life to many.
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Recently, a measure of satisfaction with sex life (SWLS) was developed among young adults (Neto, 2012). The psychometric properties for scores of this scale were satisfactory, internal consistency, item-total correlations, and factor structure indicated that scores from the SWLS could be seen as homogeneous and unidimensional. Construct validity evidence was indicated by relationships between scores on the satisfaction with sex life and characteristics indicative of the quality of a relationship and of well-being.

In the present study we examined the sex life satisfaction among middle-aged adults. The aims of this research were twofold. The first objective was to discover if there were differences in the satisfaction with sex life according to certain background characteristics, such as gender, religious involvement, time in a relationship and being in love.

Past research has documented no gender differences in regard to satisfaction with sex life (Neto, 2012). However, some gender differences in sexuality, particularly gender differences in masculinity and attitudes toward casual sex, were exceptions to the gender similarity hypothesis (Hyde, 2005). In accordance with this hypothesis, no gender differences were expected on satisfaction with sex life.

In general, religious people tend to experience higher satisfaction with life. Religious involvement did show a positive influence on satisfaction with sex life (Neto, 2012). In contrast, the relationship length had no impact on sexual satisfaction (Neto, 2012).

Several studies found that relationships characterized by love were experienced as being more satisfying. For example, a study by Sheridan and O’Leary (1988) looked at the relationship between the Locke-Wallace Marital Adjustment Test and a measure of positive affect or “love” an individual feels for his or her spouse in couples living in the State of New York and found that this measure correlated very strongly with marital satisfaction in both women (r = .87) and men (r = .89). We therefore predict that participants being in love will be more satisfied with their sex lives.

The second objective was to explore the relationship between scores on the SWLS with other relational constructs, such as love, relationship qualities (satisfaction with love, marital happiness, loneliness, commitment, and sexual desire), and personality characteristics (satisfaction with life and self-esteem). The love style Eros (passionate, disizing, and high in self-esteem) is likely to want an intense focus on the partner and a desire to become sexually intimate (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1992, p. 86). In agreement with what has been found among young adults (Neto, 2012), we expect that satisfaction with sex life will be associated positively with Eros.

Besides Eros, investigating the link among relationships constructs was a goal of this study. Based on previous research (Neto, 2012), we expect that satisfaction with sex life will be negatively associated with romantic loneliness and positively associated with commitment, and sexual desire.

Sexual satisfaction is an important component of well-being for most individuals. Previous research linked reported sexual satisfaction to increased self-esteem (Haly & Pollack, 1993), sexual self-esteem (Mann et al., 2009), healthy disposition, life satisfaction (Aeppler, Huber, Pierz, & Willems, 2000), and relationship satisfaction (Kleineberg, Blair, & Phillips, 2010). Hence satisfaction with sex life will be associated positively with life satisfaction, satisfaction with life and self-esteem.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 193 (97 women and 96 men). Their mean age was 51.64 (SD = 7.23, range = 40-68). Women (M = 52.42, SD = 7.17) and men (M = 50.94, SD = 7.20) did not differ in age, t(192) = 2.29, p = .13. Concerning religious involvement 41.3% of the participants declared themselves to be church attenders, 36.5% were believers-non-attenders, and 22.2% were non-believers.

Material

The questionnaire comprised of scales described below, along with self-assessment and demographic questions pertaining to age, sex, and other aspects of relationships. Two questions were asked to evaluate the religious inclination, “Do you believe in God?” and “Do you attend church every week (except when you are truly unable to do so)?”

(a) The 5-item Satisfaction with Sex Life Scale was developed in a previous study (Neto, 2012). The instructions for administering the scale were: “Below are five statements about your sexual life, with which you may agree or disagree. Using the 1-7 scale below, indicate your agreement with each item by placing the appropriate number on the line preceding that item. Please be open and honest in your responses.” Higher scores represented greater sex life satisfaction.

Eros Scale: The 7-item of Love Attitudes Scale (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1996; Neto, 1994) measures the erotic love attitude. Participants were asked to state how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a 5-point Likert response scale, with 1 strongly disagree and 5 strongly disagree.

Scores. The 5-item of Love Attitudes Scale (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1996; Neto, 1994) measures the erotic love attitude. Participants were asked to state how much they agreed or disagreed with each statement on a 5-point Likert response scale, with 1 strongly disagree and 5 strongly disagree.

Hedonic Pleasure. The 5-item from the short version of the Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults (SSELLA-S) were used to assess social loneliness (Brown, Senn, & Best, 2004; Fernandes, & Neto, 2009). This scale assesses the seele loneliness. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Commitment. Commitment was measured by four items adapted from previous research (Sprong & Regan, 1998). This scale assesses commitment to a relationship. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 3 (extremely uncommitted) to 1 (extremely committed).

Happiness. Self-esteem was measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), which consists of 10 items rated on a 4-point scale. Higher scores on this scale indicated greater self-esteem.

PROCEDURE

Participants were recruited and tested by a trained psychology student. The research assistant recruited potential participants in public places (coffee shops, hospitals, and schools), and arranged with the participants to where and when to administer the questionnaire. Consent from the participants was obtained before the questionnaires were administered. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured. No time limit was imposed for completion of the questionnaires. Approximately 30 minutes were required to complete the questionnaire.
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RESULTS

In Table 1 the descriptive statistics of the scales used are presented. Onebach's alpha for scores on the satisfaction with sex life was satisfactory, with alpha = 0.83. The mean score on the SWLS was 5.05, with a standard deviation of 1.22. On a seven-point scale from low to high, this score indicates that sex life satisfaction among middle-aged adults is moderately high, and more than the neutral mid-point of 4.00.

Table 1 Means, Standard Deviations and Reliabilities of the Scales

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Range</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>Cronbach's alpha</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with sex life</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>5.05</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eros</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with love life</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>5.36</td>
<td>1.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic loneliness</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>3.44</td>
<td>1.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>1-9</td>
<td>6.33</td>
<td>2.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual desire</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>5.74</td>
<td>1.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with life</td>
<td>1-7</td>
<td>4.72</td>
<td>1.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>1-1</td>
<td>3.80</td>
<td>.77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Next we are going to examine the relationship between scores on SWLS with those on other relationship measures (e.g., Eros, satisfaction with love life, romantic loneliness, commitment, and sexual desire), and well-being measures (satisfaction with life, and self-esteem) to which one might expect it to be related, and background factors. (Totals of participants in the following paragraphs do not equal 189 because some of the participants did not respond to all the questions requiring background information.)

A number of specific questions pertaining to the participants' background were included to assess the potential suppositions about how sex life satisfaction functions. The approach that was used treated each background variable as an independent variable, and using participants' total scores on satisfaction with sex life scale as a dependent variable. One-way analyses of variance were performed on the data.

Gender. There were no statistically significant gender differences for men (M = 5.0, SD = 1.2) or for women (M = 5.1, SD = 1.2, F(1, 189) = 48, p < .05, n² = .030). Men (n = 95) and women (n = 95) did not differ on sex life satisfaction.

Religious involvement. The degree of religious involvement factor was created by combining responses from the belief in God and attendance in church items, with the levels: non-believer, believer/regular-attenders, and attendees. There were no religious involvement differences in sex life satisfaction, (F(2, 178) = 1.80, p > .05, n² = .020). The believers/regular attenders (n = 73, M = 5.2, SD = 1.3), the believers/irregular attenders (n = 67, M = 5.1, SD = 1.1), and the non-believers/attendees (n = 59, M = 4.8, SD = 1.1) showed similar scores of sexual satisfaction.

Relationship length. There was not a significant effect of time in relationship, (F (1, 179) = 1.70, p > .05, n² = .010). Participants with less than five years in the relationship (n = 63, M = 4.9, SD = .89) did not differ on sexual satisfaction from those with more than five years in the relationship (n = 83, M = 5.2, SD = 1.2).

In love. There was a significant main effect of being in love now (F (1, 181) = 10.31, p < .001, n² = .054). Clearly, participants "in love now" were more satisfied with sex life (n = 149, M = 5.2, SD = 1.1) than those "not in love now" (n = 33, M = 4.5, SD = 1.8).

The SWLS was expected to correlate with other variables in predictable ways (Table 2). An inspection of the correlations indicates that SWLS scores correlate with the love attitude. Eros. Participants who said they were sexually satisfied were also likely to report higher levels of Eros.

As expected, results indicated that higher scores on the SWLS were related to lower romantic loneliness scores. Sexual satisfaction was significantly and positively correlated with commitment, or desire to stay in the relationship. Sexual desire was significantly and positively correlated with sex satisfaction (i.e., the more sexual desire felt for the partner, the more satisfaction participants experienced). Like sexual desire, satisfaction with love life was related to sex life satisfaction. Participants who indicated a higher satisfaction with love life tended to have higher levels of sexual satisfaction. Like love life satisfaction, life satisfaction was related to sex life satisfaction. The higher the sexual satisfaction felt, the more satisfaction with life. Finally, sexual satisfaction was positively associated with self-esteem. The higher the sexual satisfaction felt, the more self-esteem.

Table 2 Correlations between Satisfaction with Sex Life Scores and Other Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>(2)</th>
<th>(3)</th>
<th>(4)</th>
<th>(5)</th>
<th>(6)</th>
<th>(7)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Satisfaction with sex life</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Eros</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with love life</td>
<td>.34</td>
<td>.29</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romantic loneliness</td>
<td>-.18</td>
<td>-.24</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual desire</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with life</td>
<td>.27</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-esteem</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>-.12</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

DISCUSSION

The mean scores of sex life satisfaction was moderately high among middle-aged adults. Both, the evolutionary perspective and the exchange perspective suggest that people involved in committed relationships should report that they are generally sexually satisfied in their relationships. The evolutionary perspective suggests that individuals have developed the ability to have sexually satisfying relationships in order to solve reproductive issues. The exchange perspective suggests that people who remain in their relationship because they are rewarded should be satisfied with the over-
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all relationship as well as with specific aspects of the relationship, such as the sexual aspect. In fact, the current findings indicated that most participants involved in a romantic relationship were sexually satisfied. Several hypotheses were investigated in this study. The first hypothesis, that no differences between genders regarding the satisfaction with sex life were expected, was correct. The results on gender differences are consistent with the findings concerning life satisfaction (Diener & Ryan, 2000), love satisfaction (Neto, 2005), and the gender similarities hypothesis (Hyde, 2005).

In contrast, religious involvement did not show a positive influence on satisfaction with sex life. In general, religious people tend to experience higher satisfaction with life, and more specifically, participation in religious services, strength of religious affiliation, and prayer have all been associated with higher life satisfaction levels (Diener & Suls, 2004). However, among middle-aged adults, contrary to what has been observed among young adults (Neto, 2012), religious involvement had no impact on sexual satisfaction.

Similarly, the relationship length had no impact on sexual satisfaction. Regardless of the duration of relationship respondents viewed their sex life as satisfactory. These results are in agreement with those of a study conducted in Finland (Kontula & Hauvio-Mannila, 2009). A higher number of years lived together had no impact on sexual satisfaction.

We found that being in love does indeed change one's perspective. Participants in love were more satisfied with sex life than were participants not in love. Lovers really do wear rose-coloured glasses (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1988). Whether someone is in love or not appears to affect sex life satisfaction.

The SWLS showed significant relationships with the variables employed in the research and were consistent with predictions. Indeed, sex life satisfaction was positively associated with Eros. Eros represents the emotionally intense individual who is looking for a psychologically intimate and open relationship as well as a passionately expressive one. The Eros lover is self-affirmative for producing desired responses in others and tends to prefer to establish relatively close and exclusive romantic relationships.

Satisfaction with sex life was negatively associated with romantic loneliness. This finding is also consistent with previous research indicating that romantic loneliness is related to dating frequency, romantic involvement, and dyadic adjustment (Dittmar & Spicher, 1993). This may mean that romantic loneliness has been linked to a number of psychological difficulties.

Current findings are in agreement with previous research showing that characteristics indicative of the quality of a relationship, such as commitment to relationship and sexual desire, are related to level of sexual satisfaction (e.g., Lawrence & Byers, 1985). As expected, commitment to the relationship and sexual desire were associated with sexual satisfaction.

An additional hypothesis, that certain measures of well-being would be related to sex life satisfaction, was confirmed. The more overall life satisfaction, life satisfaction and self-esteem that participants experienced the more life satisfaction. These findings are in agreement with studies showing an association between overall relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction (Byers, 2005; Sprecher, 2002). Generally, domain satisfaction and life satisfaction have been shown to correlate substantially (Pavot & Diener, 2000). Current results supported this picture for a specific domain satisfaction, as sex satisfaction correlated highly with life satisfaction.

Clearly, further validation of the SWLS is desirable. In addition to contributing further evidence of the scales validity, such research could lead to a better understanding of the nature of sexual satisfaction. Although work remains in the area of validation, the current instrument appears promising. The instrument can be used in several ways for both research and counselling. For example, the SWLS can be employed in research assessing how partners experience sex during major life transitions such as birth of the first child or a serious illness of one of the partners. The scale can also be appropriate for research on infertility in relationships. Further, the SWLS has potential for clinical use. The scale can be employed by clinicians interested in obtaining a measure of "that clients' sex life satisfaction. Repeated administrations of the SWLS can be used to monitor change throughout the course of the therapy which has been done.

There are several limitations and issues stemming from this study that deserve mention. First, this study is cross-sectional in nature. The dynamics of relationship satisfaction have been found to change across time (Bronte & Frieze, 1988). Longitudinal studies tracking correlates of sex life satisfaction during various stages of a relationship would be of interest. Second, no attempt was made to draw causal inferences from the data. We believe that even as much as such constructs as quality relations measure other well-being variables, influence sex life satisfaction, they also influence each other. The process consists of a larger number of feedback loops. In spite of the limitations, the present findings attest to the psychometric qualities of the SWLS and to its relevance to both fundamental and applied research.

REFERENCES


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