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SATISFACTION WITH SEX LIFE AMONG MIDDLE-AGED ADULTS

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ABSTRACT

In the current study we examined the sex life satisfaction among middle-aged adults. The aims of this research were twofold. The first objective was to examine whether there were differences in the satisfaction with sex life according to certain background characteristics. The second objective was to study the relationships between sex satisfaction and other relational constructs. Participants numbered 193 with a mean age of 51.64. Scores from the SWSLS have favourable psychometric properties among which Cronbach's alpha was 0.83. 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 romantic loneliness) 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 SWSLS for research and clinical purposes are offered.

Keywords: Satisfaction, sex, well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Sex life satisfaction is particularly important for researchers of intimate relations (Goodwin, 2009) for two reasons. First, sexual satisfaction provides one mechanism through which to view a relationships 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 this sex life to that standard. Hence, this is a subjective judgment, rather than a judgment based on some externally imposed objective standard (Diener et al., 1985). 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 (SWSLS) 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 SWSLS 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 current 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 masturbation and attitudes toward casual sex, were exceptions to the gender similarities 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 characterised by love were experienced as being more satisfactory. For example, a study by Broderick and O'Leary (1986) 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 life.

The second objective was to explore the relationship between scores on the SWSLS with those on other relational constructs, such as Eros, relationship qualities (satisfaction with love life, romantic loneliness, commitment, and sexual desire), and personality characteristics (satisfaction with life and self-esteem). The love style Eros (passionate, disclosing, 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. 64). 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 (Hally & Pollack, 1993), sexual self-esteem (Ménard & Offman, 2009), healthy disposition, life satisfaction (Apt, Hubert, Pierce, & White, 1996), and relationship satisfaction (Holmberg, Blair, & Phillips, 2010). Hence satisfaction with sex life will be associated positively with love satisfaction, satisfaction with life and self-esteem.

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 193 (97 women and 96 men). Their mean age was 51.64 ($SD = 7.26$, range = 40-65). Women ($M = 52.42$, $SD = 7.17$) and men ($M = 50.84$, $SD = 7.29$) did not differ in age, $F(1, 192) = 2.29$, $p = .13$. Concerning religious involvement 41.3% of the participants declared themselves to be church attendees, 36.5% were believers-non attendees, and 22.2% were nonbe-



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lievers. All participants were currently involved in a romantic relationship. The mean number of months the participants had been with their romantic partner was 119.09 ($SD = 112.84$; the range was 1 month to 465 months).

Material

The questionnaire consisted 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 involvement: "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 represent greater sex life satisfaction.

Eros Scale. The 7-item of Love Attitudes Scale (Hendrick & Hendrick, 1986; 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 5 as *strongly agree* and 1 as *strongly disagree*. The higher score signifying a higher value of that love attitude variable. Cronbach standardised alphas for the current study were .83 for Eros.

The 5-item *Satisfaction with Love Life Scale* was developed in a previous study (Neto, 2005). Higher scores represent greater sex life satisfaction. Cronbach standardised alpha was .86.

Romantic Loneliness. The 5-item from the short version of the Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults (SELSA-S) were used to assess romantic loneliness (DiTommaso, Brannen, & Best, 2004; Fernandes, & Neto, 2009). This scale assesses the romantic emotional loneliness. Items were rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Cronbach standardised alpha was .71.

Commitment. Commitment was measured by four items adapted from previous research (Sprecher & Regan, 1998). This scale assesses commitment to a relationship. Items were rated on a 9-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 (*Extremely uncommitted*) to 9 (*Extremely committed*). These items were recorded so that higher scores reflected greater commitment. Cronbach standardized alpha for the current study was .77.

Two additional individual items assessed sexual desire (e.g., Regan & Berscheid, 1995) and self-esteem. The participants were asked to indicate the amount or quantity of sexual desire they currently experienced for their partner, using a 7-point Likert-type response scale (1 = *none/very little*, 7 = *very high amount*). One item was also included as a measure of self-esteem, "The way I feel about myself generally is...". This item had appropriately labelled 5-response alternatives.

Satisfaction with Life Scale. This scale consists of five items (Diener et al., 1985). The reliability and the validity of this scale have been previously demonstrated for a Portuguese population (Neto, 1993, 1995). Cronbach standardised alpha for the current study was .82.

Procedure

Participants were recruited and tested by a trained psychology student. The research assistant recruited potential participants in public places (cafés, shops, and streets), and arranged with the participants as 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.

**SATISFACTION WITH SEX LIFE AMONG MIDDLE-AGED ADULTS****RESULTS**

In Table 1 the descriptive statistics of the scales used are presented. Cronbach's alpha for scores on the satisfaction with sex life was satisfactory, with $\alpha = 0.83$. The mean score on the SWSLS 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

	Range	Means	Standard Deviations	Cronbach's alpha
Satisfaction with sex life	1-7	5.05	1.22	.83
Eros	1-5	3.67	.82	.83
Satisfaction with love life	1-7	5.36	1.17	.86
Romantic loneliness	1-7	3.44	1.06	.71
Commitment	1-9	6.33	2.07	.77
Sexual desire	1-7	5.74	1.36	---
Satisfaction with life	1-7	4.72	1.21	.82
Self-esteem	1-5	3.80	.77	---

Next we are going to examine the relationship between scores on SWSLS 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 193 because some of the participants did not respond to all the questions requesting 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 ($M = 5.1$, $SD = 1.2$, $F(1, 182) = .48$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .003$). Men ($n = 90$) and women ($n = 93$) 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/non-attender, and attendee. There were no religious involvement differences in sex life satisfaction, [$F(2, 178) = 1.80$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .020$]. The believers/regular attendees ($n = 73$, $M = 5.2$, $SD = 1.3$), the believers/non attendees ($n = 67$, $M = 5.1$, $SD = 1.1$), and the non-believers/non attendees ($n = 39$, $M = 4.8$, $SD = 1.1$) showed similar scores of sexual satisfaction.

Relationship length. There was not a significant effect of time in relationship, [$F(1, 175) = 1.70$, $p > .05$, $\eta^2 = .010$]. Participants with less than five years in the relationship ($n = 83$, $M = 4.9$, $SD =$



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1.2) did not differ on sexual satisfaction from those with more than five years in the relationship ($n = 93$, $M = 5.2$, $SD = 1.2$).

Currently in love. There was a significant main effect of being in love now [$F(1, 181) = 10.31$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .054$]. 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" ($n = 33$, $M = 4.5$, $SD = 1.6$).

The SWSLS was expected to correlate with other variables in predictable ways (Table 2). An inspection of the correlations indicates that SWSLS 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 SWSLS 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

Variables	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
(1) Satisfaction with sex life	---						
(2) Eros	.27***	---					
(3) Satisfaction with love life	.34***	.39***	---				
(4) Romantic loneliness	-.18*	-.24***	-.14	---			
(5) Commitment	.22**	.27***	.23**	-.22**	---		
(6) Sexual desire	.24**	.27***	.21**	-.17*	-.03	---	
(7) Satisfaction with life	.27**	.17*	.31***	-.09	.08	.26***	---
(8) Self-esteem	.19*	.01	.09	-.12	.06	.12	.19**

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

DISCUSSION

The mean score 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, 2009), 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 & Seligman, 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 & Haavio-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 SWSLS 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 affective 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 (DiTommaso & Spinner, 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, 1995). 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 love satisfaction, life satisfaction and self-esteem that participants experienced the more sex 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, 2008). Current results supported this picture for a specific domain satisfaction, as sex satisfaction correlated highly with life satisfaction.

Clearly, further validation of the SWSLS is desirable. In addition to contributing further evidence of the scale's 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 SWSLS 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



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be appropriate for research on infidelity in relationships. Further, the SWSLS has potential for clinical use. The scale can be employed by counsellors interested in obtaining a measure of their clients' sex life satisfaction. Repeated administrations of the SWSLS 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 (Grote & Frieze, 1998). Longitudinal studies tracing 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 such constructs as quality relations measures and 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 its psychometric qualities of the SWSLS and to its relevance to both fundamental and applied research.

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