ATTACHMENT ORIENTATIONS AND FEMALE SEXUAL FUNCTION: THE MEDIATION ROLE OF SEXUAL ASSERTIVENESS AND SELF-CONSCIOUSNESS.

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Abstract
The present study examined the relations between attachment orientations (i.e., anxiety and avoidance) and sexual function, and the potential mediating role of sexual assertiveness and self-consciousness (self-focus and embarrassment). A sample of 120 married women completed surveys assessing attachment orientations, sexual assertiveness, self-consciousness and sexual function. Path analyses were conducted. Results indicated that sexual assertiveness and embarrassment mediated the relationship between attachment anxiety and sexual function. Attachment avoidance did not have a direct effect on sexual function but it had a direct effect on self-focus. Assertiveness mediated the relationship between embarrassment and sexual function. This model explained 39% of the variance in married women sexual function.

Keywords: Attachment Orientation; assertiveness; Self-Consciousness; Female Sexual Function
.1. Introduction

Prevalence data suggest that more than 40% of women experience sexual problems (Kingsberg & Althof, 2009). Compared with research on men’s sexual dysfunction, far less is known about the precise etiology of and effective treatments for sexual dysfunction in women (Brotto & Klein, 2010). According to Welsh (2002), sexual dysfunction is anything that inhibits a person from enjoying sex. Essentially, many women need to feel safe before letting go into arousal. Thus, bad experiences under cut this feeling of safety (Brody, 2003). Many homes have broken as a result of the couple’s ignorance of each other’s sexual needs (Oniye, 2008). Understanding how attachment styles affect sexual function could help psychologists target those underlying mechanisms in therapy, which may be more amenable to therapeutic change.

1.1 Attachment as a Predictor of Sexual Function: Attachment is defined as an affectional bond to another person, who is irreplaceable by others although there may be more than one such relationship (Daniel, 2006). ‘Attachment styles’ are relatively coherent and stable patterns of emotion and behavior, exhibited in close relationships (Hinnon, Sanderman & Sprangers, 2009). Davis, Shaver, Widaman, Vernon, Follette and Beitzp (2006) have shown that Attachment styles are formed in infancy and childhood based on the quality of the child’s relationship with primary caregivers. Bowlby posited that early interactions with significant others instill expectations and beliefs that subsequently shape behavior regarding what relationship partners should be like during adulthood (Bowlby, 1980; in Butzer & Campbell, 2008). An individual's attachment style therefore consists of several working models that apply to a broad range of situations. Working models are thought to consist of organized beliefs that shape the individual’s expectations, perceptions, reactions and behaviors (Platts, Tyson and Mason, 2002). According to Attachment theory, Zhang and Hazan (2002) hold that the interpersonal schema or internal working models that an individual develops in the context of attachment relationships can have a profound impact on aspects of a person's relationships, including sex. Bartholomew and Horowitz (as cited in Gentzler & Kerns, 2004) designed a 4-category model that also captures how people vary in terms of anxiety and avoidance: secure (low anxiety, low avoidance); preoccupied (high anxiety, low avoidance); dismissing, (low anxiety, high avoidance); and fearful (high anxiety, high avoidance).

Specifically, Attachment theorists suggest that the attachment system and the sexual system are closely linked. “There is no sexuality without attachment” (Laschinge, Purnell, Schwartz, White, & Wingfield, 2004). In a study, Impett, Gordon, and Strachman (2008) found that anxious attachment was positively associated with engaging in sex to reduce feelings of insecurity about the relationship, to feel emotionally close to their partner, to gain reassurance about their partner’s feelings and relationships, to increase their self-esteem, and to reduce stress. Attachment avoidance was also positively associated with engaging in sex to reduce insecurity and stress and was negatively correlated with engaging in sex to feel emotionally close to their partner and for reassurance. Birnbaum (2007) also found that securely attached individuals reported engaging in sexual intercourse mainly to express love for their partner. Shaver and Hazan (1988) hypothesized that attachment insecurity would interfere with perception of signals of sexual attraction and arousal, and affect the motives for and experience of sexual encounters. Both major forms of attachment insecurity, anxiety and avoidance, are associated lower levels of sexual arousal, pleasure, and satisfaction (Brassard, Shaver & Lussier, 2007).

1.2. Sexual Assertiveness as a Predictor of Sexual Function. The construct of sexual assertiveness has been developed to further the understanding of women’s communication strategies to protect their sexual health, and is predicated on the assumption that women have rights over their bodies and to verbal expressions of their sexuality (Rickert, Sanghvi & Wiemann, 2002). Many researchers believe that sexual assertiveness is necessary for healthy sexual relationships (Morokoff, Quina, Harlow, et al, 1997, Haavio- Mannila & Kontula, 1997; Hurlbert, 1991; Hurlbert, Apt, & Rabehl, 1993; Tolman, 2002). Sexual assertiveness is important for attainment of sexual goals (Muehlenhard & McCoy, 1991). A number of studies have shown that assertiveness positively correlates with markers of sexual function including sexual satisfaction, sexual arousability, ability to orgasm and subjective sexual desire (Sanchez Phelan, Moss-Racusin & Good, 2012; Kiefer & Sanchez, 2007; Sanchez, Kiefer, & Ybarra, 2006, Hurlbert, 1991). Study Sanchez, Kiefer, Ybarra(2006) demonstrated that women’s adoption of a submissive sexual role predicted lower reported arousal and greater reported difficulty becoming sexually aroused; sexual autonomy mediated these effects. We believe that women learn to associate sex with female submission, an association that induces submissive sexual behavior. Moreover, we believe that submissive sexual behavior affords women less autonomy in the sexual context, thereby impairing sexual function.
1.3. Sexual Self-Consciousness as a Predictor of sexual function. Self-Consciousness is composed of two components: self-focus and embarrassment. The construct of self-focused attention has been discussed as relating to sexual function since Masters & Johnson’s (1970) introduction of the constructs “spectatoring” and “sensate focus.” Spectatoring is a process that involves a person focusing on him/herself “from a third person perspective during sexual activity, rather than focusing on one’s sensations and/or sexual partner, can increase performance fears and cause deleterious effects on sexual performance. (Trapnell, Meston, Gorzalka, 1997; Wiederman 2001). Van den Hout and Barlow (2000) found that “one of the pathological processes in dysfunctional subjects is an attentional process: a self-focus on performance-related concerns …” (p. 247). Wiederman (2000) studied 200 young women who completed various measures of body image, self-focused attention, sexual esteem, sexual assertiveness and sexual avoidance. Importantly, those women with more body image self-consciousness with a partner reported more sexual avoidance, less sexual assertiveness. The hypothesized causal role in sexual dysfunction of self-focused attention has recently gained new empirical support. Meston (2006) found that induction of self-focused attention decreased genital arousal in sexually functional, but not in sexually dysfunctional women.

One of the first obstacles in helping women overcome sexual dysfunction is getting beyond the embarrassment and becoming comfortable discussing these issues. Shame is a self-conscious emotion since it is an emotion that involves the self-evaluating the self (internal shame) and also how the self exists in the mind of others (external shame). Shame arises from our early interactions with significant others and develops later than primary emotions (e.g., anger, fear, joy). (Gilbert; 2002; Lewis, 2000). One emotion that may have particular significance for attachment-related dynamics and in close relationships. (Matos & Pinto-Gouveia, 2010; Lopez et al,1997). From an attachment perspective, it would thus seem that individuals with negative self-models (i.e. those with preoccupied and fearful attachment styles) may be especially disposed toward shame-proneness Research on shame has stressed the key role this emotion plays in human functioning in general, and mainly, its powerful impact in a wide range of psychological symptoms and numerous intrapersonal and interpersonal problems (Gilbert, & Andrews, 1998). a secure partner will be able to communicate more openly, assert needs more easily, be more empathic and responsive to his or her partner, and explore physical and emotional closeness in and out of the bedroom. Indeed, anxiety and avoidance are linked with fewer positive and more negative feelings during sex (Johnson & Zuckarini, 2010).

Sex researchers tend to disregard relationship processes when studying sexual functioning and relationship researchers largely ignore the importance of sex variables in affecting adult romantic relationships. Both research fields have been developed in relative isolation. It is, nevertheless, important to address the theoretical and empirical gap between both fields because a full understanding of sexuality in the context of relationships requires measuring both dimensions. It is unfortunate that, until recently, sex researchers are not familiar with relationship theories and vice versa and therefore the present paper makes an important contribution on this behalf. Another important merit of this study is the inclusion of mediating variables that may help explaining the association between attachment and sex, thereby going beyond simply establishing the predicted link between both variables.

1.4 Purpose of the Current Study. The purpose of the current study was to examine the relationships among attachment, Self-Consciousness (embarrassment and self-focus), assertiveness and sexual function. Three main hypotheses were proposed: (1) both attachment avoidance and anxiety ratings would correlate negatively with ratings of assertiveness and sexual function and it has a positive relationship with Self-Consciousness (2) ratings of sexual assertiveness would correlate positively with ratings of sexual function and also Self-Consciousness (embarrassment and self-focus) has a negative relationship with sexual function; and (3) self-Consciousness(embarrassment and self-focus), and assertiveness would mediate the relationships between attachment avoidance and anxiety and sexual function. (Figure 1). In this article, sexual function is placed in the context of attachment theory and behavioral, cognitive and emotional factors.
2. Method

2.1 Participants

Participants Hundred-twenty married women volunteered for the study without compensation. Study participation criteria were: (a) ranging from 20 to 45 years (mean = 35.55±6.90) (b) being married to their present spouse for 1 or more years (mean marriage duration= 10.11±7.34), and (c). Education level ranged from Diploma and above.

2.2 Procedure

We used “convenience sampling” for the selection. The volunteers were selected from among who attended the psychology clinic in Gonbad (Golestan, Iran). Participants were approached individually by a female recruiter and asked whether they would like to take part in a research study on sexuality within relationships. All of them were volunteers, and were not given any payment. Most participants completed the questionnaires in about 20 minutes. Hundred-twenty women returned questionnaires. The present study is based on 120 married women who provided complete data.

2.3 Measures

2.3.1. Experience in Close Relationships Scale (ECRS). The Experience in Close Relationships Scale (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) measured attachment orientations. This self-report scale consists of 36 items tapping the dimensions of attachment anxiety and avoidance. Participants indicated the extent to which each item was descriptive of their feelings in close relationships on a 7-point scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ (1) to ‘strongly agree’ (7). Eighteen items appointed attachment anxiety, and 18 items appointed attachment avoidance. A sample item for the Anxiety subscale includes “I worry that romantic partners won’t care about me as much as I care about them,” and a sample item for the Avoidance subscale includes “I prefer not to be too close to romantic partners.” Global attachment scores were computed by averaging the relevant items. Higher scores indicated greater attachment-related avoidance or anxiety. In the study of Birnbaum (2007), reliability was strong for the anxiety items. (α = .87) and avoidance items (α = .84). The internal consistency in our sample was satisfactory, ranging from Cronbach’s (α = .82) for the anxiety subscale to (α = .71) for the avoidance subscale.

2.3.2. Female Sexual Function Index (FSFI). The FSFI (Rosen & et al, 2000) is a 19-item instrument, providing information on the major dimensions of sexual function. A principal component analysis identified six factors: Sexual interest/desire, sexual arousal, lubrication, orgasm, sexual satisfaction and sexual pain. The measure has acceptable test-retest reliability (r = 0.79–0.86), internal consistency (Cronbach’s α = 0.82 and higher). The measure allows the calculation of specific indexes for each dimension as well as a sexual function index (calculated through the sum of the specific dimensional indexes), with higher scores indicating greater levels of sexual functioning. Internal consistency was good in the current study (α = .91).

2.3.3. Hurlbert Iindex of Sexual Assertiveness (HISA). The Hurlbert Index of Sexual Assertiveness (Hurlbert, 1991) assesses the frequency with which respondents engage in 25 activities related to assertive behavior in sexual situations on a scale from 0 (all of the time) to 4 (never). For instance, they are asked how often “I feel uncomfortable talking during sex.” Possible scores range from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating higher sexual assertiveness. The author reported high internal consistency and evidence for the scale’s predictive validity. Internal consistency was good in the current study (α = .88).

2.3.4. Sexual Self-Consciousness Scale (SSCS). SSCS is a 12-item (Van Lankveld & et al, 2008) that contributed to two subscales, termed “Sexual Embarrassment” and “Sexual Self-Focus.” Items were presented as brief descriptive statements. Participants rated their level of endorsement on a 5-point Likert type scale. Scales were Strongly Disagree = 0, Disagree a Little = 1, Neither Agree or Disagree = 2, Agree a Little = 3, and Strongly Agree = 4. The internal consistency of the final version was good for the full 12-item scale (α = .85). The coefficient alpha was in the current study (α=.70).
3. Result

3.1. Preliminary analyses.

Initially, means, standard deviations, and correlations were computed among variables (i.e., attachment orientations, sexual embarrassment, sexual self-focus, sexual assertiveness, sexual functioning, see table 1). As expected, avoidance and anxiety attachment, sexual embarrassment, sexual self-focus, were negatively associated with sexual function. In addition, sexual assertiveness was positively associated with sexual function. In this research we used path analysis. The multivariate normality test (Mardia's multivariate kurtosis coefficient) was used to test the models in the present study. The results of the multivariate normality test indicated that the data were multi-variate normal, Mardia = 4.57, C.R. 2.52.

In this study, the measurement model was estimated in the AMOSE 16 program. The results showed that All the paths were significant except the paths from attachment avoidance to sexual function, embarrassment, assertiveness and from self-focus to sexual function and from attachment anxiety to self-focus (β = -.05, .02, .01, .03, and -.05, respectively). To improve of the model fit indexes were excluded from the model parameters that were not significant different from zero. The results showed a good fit of the model to the data. We tested the proposed model linking women’s attachment orientations, behavioral, cognitive and emotional factors on sexual functioning in the hypothetical model. It will review the results to be Table 2 is observed.

As shown in figure 2, path analyses revealed that some of the hypotheses linking the attachment variables, sexual assertiveness, embarrassment and self-focus on sexual function were supported. Looking at the anxiety pathway, the greater a women’s anxiety the greater the sexual embarrassment and the lower sexual function in the final model. The indirect effect of anxiety on sexual function with the mediation embarrassment and assertiveness was significant (-.13), and for a total effect of -.33. Thus, this path was retained in the final model. We found no evidence for the direct association between avoidance and sexual function. Because the path between avoidance and sexual function was no significant; thus, we dropped it from the model. We have hypothesized that avoidance attachment may be associated with sexual assertiveness, embarrassment and self-focus in the hypothetical scenario. However, there were no direct effect between the avoidance attachment with the sexual assertiveness and embarrassment. Thus, we dropped it from the model. While the direct effect of avoidance on self-focus was significant. Avoidance had an indirect effect of -.3 on sexual function and for a total effect of -.5. The indirect effect of avoidance on sexual function. We have hypothesized that assertiveness, embarrassment and self-focus may be direct effected on the women’s sexual function. Looking at the sexual assertiveness pathway, the sexual assertiveness and also embarrassment were significant effects on sexual function, the greater a women’s embarrassment, the lower the sexual assertiveness and the lower sexual function in the model. The direct effect of assertiveness on sexual function was significant. Also, the direct effect of embarrassment on sexual function was significant. Embarrassment had an indirect effect of -.13 on sexual function and for a total effect of -.5. Self-focus had an indirect effect of -.23 on sexual function. Thus, these paths were retained in the final model. We found no evidence for the predicted direct effect association between self-focus and sexual function. We dropped it from the model. Other paths in the hypothetical model were maintained in the final model. The goodness-of-fit test yielded a chi-square of 3.86, TLI = .93, CFI = .98, GFI = .94, AGFI = .96. And RMSEA = .000. Table 2 contains fit indices of this model. These results indicate a good fit of the structural equation model of proposed variables on Sexual function.

In brief, results indicated that sexual embarrassment and sexual assertiveness mediate the relationship between attachment anxiety and sexual functioning, as hypothesized. However, attachment anxiety was not associated with sexual self-focus; therefore there is no mediating relationship (though there was a direct effect of attachment anxiety on sexual functioning). None of the mediating relationships predicted between attachment avoidance and sexual functioning were found to be significant. Attachment avoidance was associated with sexual self-focus.

4. Discussion

In the present study, the role of attachment orientations, behavioral-cognitive and emotional factor’s (sexual assertiveness, embarrassment and self-focus) in sexual function was considered in a community sample of married women. The significant findings in the present study are that sexual embarrassment and assertiveness mediated the relationships attachment anxiety and sexual function. Van lankveld, Gijen & Sykora (2008) have shown that women scored higher on the sexual embarrassment variable than men. This finding can be viewed as supporting the notion of this mechanism in women. Our study to clarify the role of sexual embarrassment in the mediation and maintenance of sexual dysfunction to clarify the causal path ways involved.
Moreover, result showed that sexual assertiveness was as mediator between embarrassment and sexual function. Why does sexual assertiveness mediate the relationship between embarrassment and sexual function? The results of the study woo, Brotto and Gorzalka (2010) has shown the important impact of sexual assertiveness. These data suggest that sexual assertiveness may play a role in the understanding of sexual dysfunction. Thus, another possibility lies in this phrase that “shame is a response to failure and to ensuing feelings of inadequacy” (Hadar, 2008:169). This finding is consistent also with (kelner & Buswell’s, 1997; in Verbekea & Bagozzib, 2003) observation that embarrassment has relief functions; embarrassment interfered with self-confidence and led them to scale-down their assertiveness. From this viewpoint, we see that embarrassment can have significant negative consequences which in turn impacts performance negatively.

Consistent with the research the Kulick (2003) study showed that 68.5% of women reported saying no when they meant yes. When asked why they said no when they meant yes, women answered either that they were afraid of appearing promiscuous. Or they felt inhibited about sex, or they wanted to manipulate the male-they were angry with him. Also, Impett & Peplau (2002) demonstrate that anxiously attached women are overly reported consenting to unwanted sex in order to avoid conflict or to prevent a partner from losing interest in the relationship. Also, Hurlbert (1991) showed that sexually assertive women reported higher frequencies of sexual activity and orgasms, rated themselves as having greater subjective sexual desire, and reported greater marital and sexual satisfaction. also Shaffer, Young, and Zakalik( 2005) has shown that individuals high in relationship anxiety often underestimate how positively their partner actually sees them and expect to be rejected by their partner. According to the research literature individuals with negative working models of self, experience a higher degree of attachment anxiety. Thus, According to research (kelner & Buswell’s, 1997; in Verbekea & Bagozzib, 2003) the individuals are more prone to experience embarrassment than other. Because they are rooted in an awareness and concern for what others think of themselves. The study Shaffer, Young, and Zakalik( 2005) also had suggested that avoidant attachment had an indirect impact on shame.

According to attachment theory, Individuals with negative working models of others experience a higher degree of attachment avoidance. They make use of a deactivated attachment strategy characterized by emotional and cognitive regulation patterns that deflect attention from both attachment-related thoughts and feelings and distressing stimuli (Haggerty, Hilsenroth, & Vala-Stewart 2009).Therefore, It is interesting to note that the direct relationships between attachment avoidance and self-focus was statistically significant. These results indicate that whatever is to avoid higher, self-focus also is higher.

It is interesting to note that the direct paths between attachment avoidance with sexual embarrassment, assertiveness were not statistically significant, suggesting that these relationships can be described exclusively in terms of indirect effects self-focus. Future studies should continue searching for other potential mediators that may contribute to the relationship between attachment avoidance and sexual function. The findings also indicated that attachment avoidance was not significantly associated with sexual function. Why is attachment avoidance not associated with sexual function? Possibly, some of the tendencies associated with attachment avoidance may be less marked in older samples with respondents who are involved in long term relationships. Given that highly avoidant women in the current study were currently involved in a highly committed relationship of greater duration, compared with women in many other attachment studies, it is likely that they perceived their relationship and sex life as more functional than the typical highly avoidant participant. This explanation is consistent with the finding Birnbaum (2007) indicated that although both attachment anxiety and avoidance were associated with aversive sexual affect and cognitions, attachment anxiety was more detrimental to sexual functioning. In particular, for highly avoidant women, sexual satisfaction and relational aspects were relatively disconnected.

The present research, using the path analysis, further review that the self-focus is the one that influences on sexual function. Although the model revealed no direct path, it does not mean there is no relationship between self-focus and sexual function. It only indicates that this relationship is indirect. This finding provided a more meaningful and more specific interpretation of this relationship. The findings Meston (2006) supported our hypotheses regarding the negative
effect of trait self-focused on the sexual function. This finding contrasts findings in men that have shown self-focused attention increases subjective arousal in sexually functional men (Van Lankveld and et al, 2004). This mechanism if proven robust in future tests may have important implications for the theoretical model of the development and maintenance of sexual dysfunction and for its treatment. In according to the study of van Lankveld & berg (2008) if a woman’s appraisal of how she is viewed by her sexual partner is high, self-consciousness could positively impact her sexual experience; if her appraisal is negative, this trait could be detrimental to her sexual response. Based on this reasoning, it was predicted self-focus would not be directly related to measures of sexual function.

Several limitations of the present study warrant further research on this topic. First, findings from the present study were based exclusively on self-report data. One problem with directly asking subjects how self-focus they are at a given time is that the question itself could heighten self-awareness. This study’s sample consisted only of married women. More specifically, because women develop a more emotional-interpersonal orientation toward sex than do men (e.g., Birnbaum & laser-Brandt, 2002), their sexual functioning may be more influenced by internal working models of interpersonal relationships (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002). Consequently, findings from the present study should be interpreted with caution until they can be replicated by future research. Further, because finding were based on data collected from a relatively small, homogeneous sample, they may not be generalized to other populations because differences in level of functioning, ethnicity may result in a pattern of findings that differs from the one found in the present study. One of the problems in this research is about cultural taboos in society. That is why the researcher got some problem when he would try to give questionnaires to filling.

Despite limitations, however, the present study provides new insight into the contribution of attachment orientations to the operation of the sexual system within the context of adult ongoing romantic relationship. Clinicians can help clients with insecure attachment develop awareness and understanding of the underlying sources of their dysfunction by exploring how their habitual attachment-related strategies may be preventing them from meeting their sexually needs and how these strategies, in turn, relate to their sexual dysfunction. In conclusion, effective counseling with these populations may require that explicit attention be paid to both reducing the individuals’ use of negative, maladaptive strategies as well as directly helping them find more positive, adaptive methods of satisfying unmet sexually needs.

Ethics approval. This study was conducted with the approval of the Human Research and Ethics Committee of Isfahan University.

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References


Annexure

![Diagram of theoretical model]

**Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables**

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<td>-.553**</td>
<td>.536**</td>
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* *p < 0.05  **p < 0.01
Table 2. Model Fit Summary

*Note:* DF, degrees of freedom; CMIN, minimum fit function x2; x2 test compared with saturated model; TLI, Tucker–Lewis index; CFI, comparative fit index; PNFI, The Parsimony Normed Fit Index. PCFI is the product of the CFI and PRATIO. GFI, goodness-of-fit index; AGFI, adjusted goodness-of-fit index; RMSEA, root mean square error of approximation. The following abbreviations have the same indications:

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Figure 2. The structural model. N = 120. *p < .05  **p < .01  ***p < .001.