



THE ROLES OF SOCIAL ANXIETY AND SEXUAL COMMUNICATION IN MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIPS



Matthew Ogan
John Brown University

INTRODUCTION

Recent polls have indicated a rise in the divorce rate of American marriages (PRC, 2017). Divorce is a significant stressor for individuals and families (Johnston, 2017), and it dramatically impacts the emotional health of children of divorced or separated parents (Popenoe, 2009; Richardson & McCabe, 2001). While the causes for this rise are abundant, it is certainly impacted by couples experiencing reduced relationship satisfaction. Anxious individuals and couples could face heightened tension in their marriages due to excessive fear of certain stressors, which could limit their sexual relationship. Improved understanding of how anxiety influences relationship and sexual satisfaction, as well as sexual communication, will strengthen the current understanding of anxiety in marriage relationships, potentially leading to greater insight into the role of anxiety in sexual communication.

- Social anxiety – experience of distress in or avoidance of social situations where one is likely to be evaluated by others
- Sexual communication – open, honest communication of sexual matters through which meanings, functions, and effects of the sexual relationship are discussed
- Sexual satisfaction – affective response to one’s evaluations of their sexual relationship, including needs being met and expectations being fulfilled
- Relationship satisfaction – a state of positive feelings toward one’s partner and attraction to the relationship

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research suggests that relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction are strongly intertwined (e.g. Litzinger & Gordon, 2007; McNeil & Byers, 2005). Further evidence points to sexual satisfaction serving as a mediating variable between sexual communication and marital satisfaction (Cupach & Comstock, 1990). These findings suggest that the sexual relationship plays a strong role in romantic partnerships.

Sexual communication can include disclosures about likes and dislikes in sexual interactions, working through sexual conflicts, and flirting with reference to sex. Vast amounts of research point to open and honest sexual communication being associated with both relationship and sexual satisfaction (e.g. Montesi et al., 2010; Timm & Keiley, 2011), to the point of the establishment of a model that explains a causal effect of sexual communication on sexual satisfaction and marital satisfaction (Cupach & Comstock, 1990). Overall, communicating about sex is directly related to improved relational outcomes.

Thirdly, social anxiety has been found to be negatively associated with relationship satisfaction (Porter & Chambless, 2014) and sexual satisfaction (Offman & Matheson, 2005). It even causes emotional wear on partners of anxious individuals (Rehman et al., 2015). Studies have also indicated that anxious people limit their vulnerability in communication, which leads to inhibited disclosure of sensitive information (Khoury & Findlay, 2014). While this research is telling, little has been done to investigate strictly married couples, as this type of relationship could influence the extent to which these variables interact.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How does sexual communication influence sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction in married couples?
- How does social anxiety influence sexual communication in married couples?
- In what ways does social anxiety influence sexual and marital satisfaction?

METHODOLOGY

The sample of participants was drawn from the population of heterosexual married couples within the USA. Thirty-two individuals completed the survey. Participants were recruited via Facebook messages and advertisements, hanging posters in public spaces throughout the Siloam Springs, AR community, word of mouth, and Craigslist advertisements in the Tulsa, OK and Fayetteville, AR areas. Respondents were told of the subject of the study and offered the chance to win a drawing for a \$25 gift card to a restaurant of their choosing, conditional upon their participation in the study.

Upon contacting the researcher, participants were sent a packet that included an informed consent form, demographic questions, and five professionally developed scales:

- Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976)
- Index of Sexual Satisfaction (Hudson et al., 1981)
- Sexual Communication Satisfaction Inventory (Wheless et al., 1984)
- Fear of Intimacy Scale (Descutner & Thelen, 1991)
- Social Interaction Anxiety Scale (Mattick & Clarke, 1998)

RESULTS

- Moderate positive relationship between sexual communication and relationship satisfaction, $r(30) = .66, p < .01$.
- Strong positive correlation between sexual communication and sexual satisfaction, $r(30) = .79, p < .01$.
- Moderate negative correlation between social anxiety and sexual communication, $r(30) = -.47, p < .01$.
- Among exclusively anxious individuals, the correlation between social anxiety and sexual communication was very strongly negative, $r(4) = -.95, p < .01$.
- Among exclusively anxious individuals, the correlation between social anxiety and sexual satisfaction was strongly negative, $r(4) = -.85, p < .05$.
- Sexual satisfaction scores differed significantly for anxious and non-anxious individuals, $t(30) = 2.19, p < .05$.
- For couples where at least one spouse scored high in social anxiety, sexual satisfaction and sexual communication satisfaction were strongly correlated between each spouse, $r(4) = .64, p < .05$ for sexual satisfaction, $r(4) = .80, p < .001$ for sexual communication satisfaction.

FIGURES

	Sexual Sat.	Rel. Sat.	Sexual Comm.	Fear of Intimacy	Social Anxiety
Sexual Sat.	1				
Rel. Sat.	0.77***	1			
Sexual Comm.	0.79***	0.66***	1		
Fear of Intimacy	-0.45**	-0.65***	-0.54**	1	
Social Anxiety	-0.44*	-0.43*	-0.47**	0.55**	1

Figure 1. Correlations for all participants.
Note: * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$; *** = $p < .001$.

	Sexual Sat.	Rel. Sat.	Sexual Comm.	Fear of Intimacy	Social Anxiety
Sexual Sat.	1				
Rel. Sat.	-0.83***	1			
Sexual Comm.	-0.79**	0.62*	1		
Fear of Intimacy	0.68*	-0.75**	-0.59*	1	
Social Anxiety	0.66*	-0.58*	-0.47	0.72**	1

Figure 2. Correlations for anxious participants.

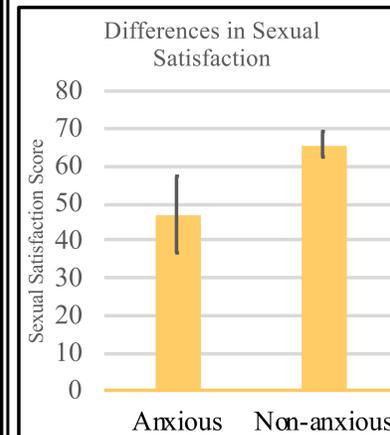


Figure 3. Significant difference in sexual satisfaction between anxious and non-anxious participants.

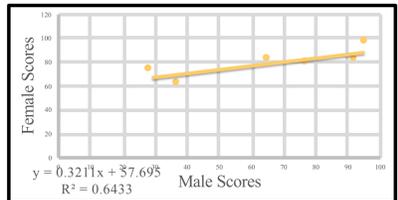


Figure 4. Within-couple correlations for sexual communication satisfaction for anxious couples.

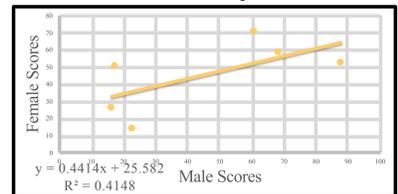


Figure 5. Within-couple correlations for sexual satisfaction for anxious couples.

DISCUSSION

As expected, sexual communication demonstrated a strong association with sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction in married couples. These results fortify past findings on the associations between sexual communication, sexual satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction.

Despite the presence of increased trust in marital relationships (Green et al., 2016), social anxiety was negatively associated with sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and sexual communication satisfaction in this study of married couples. These findings suggest that even in close marital bonds, socially anxious people still inhibit their communication for fear of rejection. Furthermore, anxiety in one spouse influences the other spouse’s sexual satisfaction and sexual communication satisfaction. This points to a need for professionals working with couples to be proficient in treating couples influenced by mental illness, especially anxiety.

Further research ought to investigate the mechanisms by which spouses of socially anxious individuals experience reduced satisfaction. Additionally, looking into the specific patterns of communication between spouses may lead to detection of further variables that prevent socially anxious people from discussing sexual matters with their partner. Finally, research should examine the gender differences in sexual communication, sexual satisfaction, fear of intimacy, and relationship satisfaction, as this study detected several significant differences.