

Commentary:

**COMMENTARY ON "IN AND OUT OF THE BEDROOM:
SEXUAL SATISFACTION IN THE MARITAL
RELATIONSHIP"**

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Abstract

In this commentary on Ashdown, Hackathorn, and Clark (2011), I highlight several key findings and methodological strengths, while also recontextualizing those findings. In particular, the topic of sexual satisfaction represents one logical “goal” of sexual development. The results indicate the factors influencing women’s and men’s sexual satisfaction are much more similar than different. They also reveal the importance of relatively common sexual behaviors (e.g., kissing, talking to one’s partner) for sexual satisfaction.

Keywords: sexuality, gender similarities, sexual satisfaction,
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**Commentary on *In and Out of the Bedroom:*
*Sexual satisfaction in the Marital Relationship***

Sexuality is a complex human behavior that includes a broad variety of beliefs and behaviors (Gagnon & Simon, 1973). The study of sexuality is also complex, with a number of perspectives employed to examine many different components of sexuality, by researchers with backgrounds in psychology, sociology, and medicine, among other fields. Some of the research is problem oriented and attempts to identify who is at risk for contracting, or transmitting, sexually transmitted infections, particularly HIV (Rhodes, Hergenrather, Bloom, Leichter, & Montano, 2009). Other research attempts to identify/predict which adolescents will have an "early" first sexual experience (for review, see Kirby, 2002). Yet other research examines the factors that influence sexual knowledge and desires (Ward, Merriwether, & Caruthers, 2006). In this present issue of JISS, Ashdown, Hackathorn, and Clark (2011) have focused on an aspect of sexuality that is important, but gets relatively less attention: sexual satisfaction among married adults. As they point out, dissatisfaction is closely linked with divorce, a substantial social problem in the US. This is clearly an important context for understanding their findings, although I place their findings within two other contexts in this commentary: normative sexual development and gender similarity. I also highlight two methodological strengths of this article.

One of the things that I find particularly interesting about the results of this paper pertain to the examination of female vs. male behavior. As is common in the sexuality literature, the authors examined differences between women and men. Their rationale is rooted within a difference in cultural expectations (or "scripts") and a history of empirical findings of difference (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Tolman, 2002). Ashdown et al.'s (2010) findings, however, suggest that women and men are more similar than different. Among seventeen specific sexual behaviors assessed, only two occurred at significantly different rates for women and men. Perhaps more importantly, the associations between sexual behaviors and sexual satisfaction rarely differed for women and men; fifteen of seventeen tests of association showed no significant difference. This pattern was also demonstrated among the relations between non-sexual characteristics and sexual satisfaction, where five of seven variables showed no significant difference in association strength (original Table 2). This pattern of results is consistent with Hyde's (2005) Gender Similarities Hypothesis, which argues that women and men are much more similar than different. These results are also consistent with arguments that female vs. male differences are often driven by contextual factors (Aries, 2006; Eagly, 2009).

The results of this paper can also be understood within the context of normative sexual behavior. This perspective positions sexual behavior as a (near-)universal component of development and as something that adolescents can do in a healthy manner, not simply as a form of risk-taking (Russell, 2005; Tolman, Striepe, & Harmon,

2003; Welsh, Rostosky, & Kawaguchi, 2000). Although this paper examines sexual satisfaction among adults in long-term relationships, it provides a logical goal or "endpoint" for earlier development. That is, Ashdown et al. provide us with some information about where sexual development could – and perhaps should – lead for healthy development later in life.

I would also like to highlight a methodological strength of this article. In particular, Ashdown et al. integrated descriptive and inferential data (see also Smiler, 2008). In many cases, researchers focus solely on the inferential results, without addressing any implications of the descriptive statistics. Here, those results tell us that the sexual behaviors most closely related to sexual satisfaction are kissing, petting, oral sex, sexual conversations with one's spouse, experimenting with sexual positions, and experimenting with different locations. By examining the descriptive results, we see that these are the six most commonly enacted sexual behaviors. The seventh most common sexual behavior, masturbating alone, was related to lower levels of sexual satisfaction for both women and men. Collectively, these findings suggest that sexual satisfaction within marriage relies on common, relatively unexceptional behaviors engaged in regularly and repeatedly with one's spouse. In other words, while sexual satisfaction may or may not be common, the behaviors needed to achieve it are quite common. This also suggests that an unsatisfying marital sexual relationship is unlikely to benefit from "doing something different" simply for the sake of novelty.

A second methodological strength, and one the authors also highlighted, was the examination of "both sexual and non-sexual constructs." Sexuality is generally understood to be a complex, multi-dimensional phenomenon that is connected to many different aspects of life. Indeed, one review of the factors related to age of first sex identified over 80 variables in a dozen categories (Kirby, 2002). To their credit, the authors examined two different components of religiosity, which is a poorly understood construct (Rostosky, Wilcox, Comer Wright, & Randall, 2004). However, they assessed only a small number of such "out of the bedroom" factors. Physical health, expectations about sexual behavior (e.g., frequency, quality), and quality of marital relationship, among others, are also relevant to examinations of sexual satisfaction within marriage. It is unclear why these factors were not assessed, but future efforts to comprehensively examine factors "in and out of the bedroom" must assess a broader range of non-sexual behaviors.

In summary, Ashdown et al. (2011) provide an important contribution to the literature by identifying sexual behaviors related to sexual satisfaction among married couples, thus providing information regarding factors that may help maintain marital happiness. I suggest that their findings also provide substantial evidence that, at least in the realm of sexuality, women and men are more similar than different, and that their findings suggest a potential outcome or endpoint for healthy sexual development. Their methods are also to be credited, both for their effective use of descriptive and inferential

statistics, and their examination of both sexual and non-sexual predictors of sexual satisfaction.

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