

Personality Traits versus the Quality of the Marital Relationship as the Determinant of Marital Sexuality

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The question of whether personality traits or the relationship among marital partners is more significant for the importance of sexuality and satisfaction in sexual interaction was examined. It was demonstrated that only interaction variables were significant, satisfying sexual relationships existing only in happy marriages. Correspondence between the partners was quite good for "satisfaction in sexual interaction," but there was no correlation for the importance sexuality had for both partners. The comparison between the two sexes additionally showed that for women sexuality was less important and satisfying compared to men. This relationship held during various stages of the marital relationship.

KEY WORDS: marital partners; interaction variables; marital happiness; personality traits; sexuality.

INTRODUCTION

An individual's sexual experience and behavior can be explained by sexual needs and personality traits which can further or hinder sexual satisfaction. Recently, Eysenck (1971a, b, 1972, 1973, 1975) has underscored the connection between personality traits and sexual experience and behavior, which he tried to prove empirically in several investigations. A correlation is seen between sexuality and the personality dimensions extraversion, neuroticism, and psychoticism. By way of example, he states that extraverts, who need stronger stimulants in general, also need stronger

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sexual stimuli. As a result, they are more likely to engage in premarital and extramarital sexual intercourse, to have sexual intercourse earlier and with more partners, and to explore more and diverse sexual techniques than introverts. Individuals with a high score in neuroticism symptomatically have a labile autonomous nervous system and experience anxiety more easily. They are likely to experience sexuality as a problem and to have less experience in this area than individuals with low neuroticism scores. Thus, according to Eysenck, the quality of sexual behavior is influenced by the personality of the individual.

Unlike Eysenck, other authors have underscored the quality of the relationship between partners when they describe sexual behavior. It is often noted that the male's sexual need is more pronounced than the female's. There are a number of interpretations of this difference. If one takes this discrepancy for granted, there follows the problem of the partners' coming to terms with each other. As a rule, the wife fixes the upper limit for the frequency of sexual intercourse (Udry, 1974). In the course of marriage, the husband adjusts to his wife's limit (Schnabel, 1975).

On the other hand, in the course of a happy marriage—and only in a happy marriage—the wife develops a more pronounced sexual need (Clark and Wallin, 1965). The correlation between sexual adjustment and general marital adjustment has been shown in nearly all investigations of “marital adjustment” (Udry, 1974). Marital sex life is felt as being especially pleasant if the marital relationship is very close (Hunt, 1974). Premarital sexuality is also linked to a certain quality of relations in a partnership, love here being the precondition for entering into sexual relations (Kaats and Davis, 1970; Stern-Poll, 1976). Sexuality is interpreted as being the expression of emotional closeness, above all, for those in the middle class (Rainwater, 1969). In a secure emotional relationship, a woman will more easily reach orgasm in sexual intercourse (Gebhard, 1966; Fisher, 1973). Should sexual problems arise, they are most likely to be solved if relations in a partnership are otherwise good (Schnabel, 1975), the object necessarily being to improve these relations (Masters and Johnson, 1970).

Thus, sexuality goes part and parcel with relations in a partnership. This applies somewhat less to men, who in part accept fleeting sexual relationships, but as a rule men also prefer sexual relationships with a steady partner (Pietropinto and Simenauer, 1977). According to Rubin (1976), sexuality for a man is the only legitimate possibility for showing emotions. According to a hypothesis postulated by Murstein (1974) a man will interpret a more pronounced sexual need in his partner as an expression of greater love.

If, in this manner, sexual behavior is to be comprehended as an expression of emotion toward the partner, then it should be determined essentially by the quality of relations in a partnership. While partners may

well bring different needs into their relationship (depending, e.g., on their personality traits), the interaction between the partners should determine the pattern of their sexuality.

OBJECTIVES

The following areas were investigated:

- (a) Is there a significant correlation between personality traits and sexuality according to Eysenck's hypothesis notably among the two major dimensions of extraversion and neuroticism?
- (b) Is there a significant correlation between sexuality and the particular relationship in a partnership?
- (c) Which of the two, personality traits or relations in a partnership, has a higher correlation with sexuality?

SAMPLE

The participants in the investigation were married couples who had replied to an appeal by the Bavarian Broadcasting Service and the magazine *Brigitte*. They had declared their readiness to participate in an inquiry on marital relations conducted by the Psychological Institute at Würzburg University.

The sample consisted of 631 couples (1262 subjects). They had been married an average of 10 years. The husbands' average age was 37, the wives' 3 years less. Roughly 40% were Protestant, 40% Catholic, and 20% of no religious persuasion. The husbands were quite highly educated, about 50% having graduated from high school or university. Most were white collar workers, civil servants, or running their own businesses. While the wives did not have as much higher education, they were still well educated; about 40% had earned an intermediate degree, and 30% had graduated from high school or university. At the time of the investigation, half of the wives were not pursuing a profession. The participants were upper middle class.

QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire contained items designed to describe marital interaction. There were statements, *inter alia*, concerning mutual support and appreciation, arguments, frankness toward the partner, interest and pleasure in the partner, importance of sexuality, and satisfaction in sexual

interaction. Most of the statements were formulated twice: the subjects were asked to describe their own sensations as well as those they perceived in their partners. In addition, the questionnaire contained statements about the evaluation of their own marriage.

PROCEDURE AND EVALUATION

Each couple received two questionnaires by mail, including return postage. Subjects were asked to fill in the questionnaires by themselves and to send them back separately. To enable the couples to be coordinated from the organizational point of view, they were asked to enter a code number, both partners' birth dates added together. This enabled the couples to be identified without difficulty.

The data were recorded on tape without the code number, with evaluation carried out along Rausche's (1979) programs (PSYST 200). Factorial analyses were initially conducted for certain sections of the questionnaire, the resultant factors being scaled. The scales employed can consequently be regarded as one dimensional. Only the major scale parameters have been provided to save space. Associations are tested by means of the product-moment correlation.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SCALES

Sexuality was described by means of the two scales *importance of sexuality* and *satisfaction in sexual interaction*. The correlates for these two scales were, on the one hand, scales for personality (*extraversion* and *neuroticism* according to Eysenck) and, on the other hand, scales for relations in partnership (*appreciation and support*, *refusal of support*, *behavior in conflicts*, *demanding frankness*, and *confiding frankness*). The scales are described in detail below.

The scale *importance of sexuality* contains four items with statements about the importance of sexual intercourse with the marital partner, about the willingness to try something new in sexual intercourse, and the subject's desire to engage in sexual intercourse more or less frequently. With $r_{ii} = 0.62$ (women) and $r_{ii} = 0.60$ (men) the internal consistency according to Spearman-Brown is satisfactory considering the brevity of the scale.

The scale *satisfaction in sexual interaction* contains eight items with statements for the subjects concerning his or her relative frequency of orgasm, satisfaction with sexual intercourse, and the subject's own passion and tenderness in everyday life and during sexual intercourse. Statements about agreeing with the partner's wishes, talking freely about sex, and the

frequency of sexual intercourse are included here. The scale has an internal consistency of $r_{tt} = 0.74$ for men and $r_{tt} = 0.82$ for women. Satisfaction of sexuality is more significant for men ($M = 31.0, S = 4.3$) than for women ($M = 28.4, S = 5.78$).

With its 20 items the scale *appreciation and support* covers the following areas: the subject's empathy with the partner, acceptance of and pleasure in his or her individuality, and solidarity with and support of the partner. The wishes of one's partner are known, one accepts one's partner with all his or her merits and deficiencies, and one feels affection for one's partner and often shows him or her this affection. One supports one's partner when he or she is in difficulty and sides with him or her, and when necessary one looks after him or her. This attitude could also be called "love." The scale is highly reliable for both sexes (women, $r_{tt} = 0.93$; men, $r_{tt} = 0.90$). Here there are no differences between the sexes (M for women, 80.66; M for men, 80.65).

In contrast to the scale *appreciation and support*, the scale *refusal of support*, with its eight items, underscores the subjects distance from their partners. This was expressed by a lack of understanding for the partner's individuality and general hesitation to support him or her. Over and above this were demonstrated acts of refusal in the past which increased the partner's difficulties in coping with problems. The scale has an internal consistency of $r_{tt} = 0.80$ for both sexes. There are no significant mean differences (men $M = 14.7$; women $M = 14.4$) between the sexes.

The scale *behavior in conflicts* (10 items) measures the vehemence of argumentative behavior. Strong emotions, breaking off communication, selective perception in arguments, and resorting to "old stories that hurt" characterize the one extreme of this scale, the other extreme being determined by efforts toward moderation and objectivity. This scale has an internal consistency or $r_{tt} = 0.78$ (men) and $r_{tt} = 0.80$ (women). Women's behavior in conflict ($M = 23.02, S = 6.6$) is significantly more vehement than men's ($M = 20.78, S = 5.77$).

The scale *demanding frankness* measures the articulation of needs by the subjects, with four items, expressing wishes and what irritates him or her. Considering its brevity, this scale is sufficiently reliable ($r_{tt} = 0.64$ for men, and $r_{tt} = 0.51$ for women). Here women have a tendency toward more demanding of frankness ($M = 15.3$ for men and 16.08 for women).

The scale *confiding frankness* (five items) is characterized by the subject's willingness to disclose him or herself to the partner, to keep nothing secret. This scale is highly reliable for both sexes ($r_{tt} = 0.83$ for men, and $r_{tt} = 0.82$ for women). There are no significant differences between the sexes ($M = 18.65$ for men; $M = 19.18$ for women).

The scale *marital happiness* measures with 12 items the way the subject evaluates his or her marriage. Subjects are considered happy in their

marriage if they call themselves happy, have never seriously thought of separation or divorce, would remarry their present partner, and describe their relations with their partner as affectionate. The scale has an internal consistency of $r_{tt} = 0.93$ and 0.94 for men and women, respectively. There are no differences between the sexes ($M = 51.9$ for men; $M = 51.2$ for women).

The scales *extraversion* and *neuroticism* were developed by Eysenck and have been taken from a German edition (Eysenck, 1959). *Extraversion* is characterized by spontaneity and sociability, *neuroticism* by emotional lability and a tendency toward depressions. For both sexes, the scales have an internal consistency that varies from $r_{tt} = 0.62$ to $r_{tt} = 0.69$, with six items being very satisfactory. Women are significantly more extraverted ($M = 12.53$, $S = 3.10$) than men ($M = 11.83$, $S = 2.90$), and are also more neurotic ($M = 12.58$, $S = 3.35$ for women; $M = 10.83$, $S = 3.44$ for men).

RESULTS

In Eysenck's view, extraverts should consider sexuality more important, and neurotics should be less satisfied. Regarding sexuality as one aspect of a relationship, it can be expected that sexuality is more satisfactory the better the relationship, i.e., the more appreciation and confiding frankness and the less refusal of support and vehement conflict behaviors. Sexuality may likewise be experienced as more important under positive circumstances, this hypothesis applying particularly to women. For men, sexuality should be very important from the outset. It can be expected that women's appreciation of sexuality increases in the course of a good relationship as a means of expressing affection. The significant results for the correlation of sexuality with dimensions of personality and the relationship are shown in Table I.

Table I. Correlations between Sexuality and Dimensions of Personality and Marital Relationships, Separately for Each Sex (Product-Moment Correlation)

Scale	Satisfaction in Sexual interaction		Importance of sexuality	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Extraversion	-.004	.122	-.001	.034
Neuroticism	-.038	-.103	.064	.049
Appreciation and support	.527	.488	.215	-.019
Behavior in conflicts	-.262	-.246	-.059	.075
Demanding frankness	.283	.312	.203	.070
Confiding frankness	.375	.337	.177	-.054
Refusal of support	-.335	-.334	-.115	.100

According to the first hypothesis, a significant correlation between personality traits and sexuality would be expected. This correlation, however, was found for men only and was restricted to the connection between sexual satisfaction, on the one hand, and extraversion and neuroticism, on the other. In this case, the variance accounted for was only 1%.

The correlation between satisfaction in sexual interaction and dimensions of the relationship in the partnership were significant and in the expected direction. The correlations with importance of sexuality are less apparent. For men, there is no correlation except for a low correspondence with refusal of support; for women, there is a positive correlation with appreciation and support and both scales concerning frankness and a negative correlation with refusal of support.

The data also suggest an answer for the third hypothesis. Personality dimensions are of no great importance for sexuality. The relationship dimensions appear considerably stronger. Within the range of satisfaction in sexual interaction, there are significant correlations that are all distinctly higher than the significant one for extraversion. Here, the scale appreciation and support is most important. Significant correlations with importance of sexuality can only be shown for women, mainly due to the fact that sexuality is generally more important for men. The importance of sexuality for women increases if they appreciate their partners and are able to express their needs, if they can express their emotions to their partners, and if they have experienced only little refusal of support. These correlations of importance of sexuality with dimensions of relations in a partnership, however, are not very high. It can be pointed out, though that as a rule personality dimensions have a low correlation with sexuality while dimensions of relationship have a high correlation, especially with satisfaction in sexual interaction. Accordingly, sexuality is to some degree determined by the interaction between the sex partners.

If sexuality depends on the interaction between the partners, it can be expected that direct interaction in sexual contact is also of consequence. Polls have shown that men want their wives to take part in intercourse more actively. In principle, it could be expected that there would be a positive correlation between the ratings of both partners for importance of sexuality too, but the results show that importance of sexuality does not correlate with the other interaction variables. Importance of sexuality is rather isolated here, this being the reason that a pronounced correlation between the partners is not necessarily expected.

With $r = 0.50$, the marital partners' self-ratings concerning satisfaction in sexual interaction were significant and in the direction expected. The marital partners were aware of this positive correlation, even regarding it as stronger than it actually was in their self-ratings. The correlation between a subject's own satisfaction and the

partner's satisfaction as he or she perceives it (men, $r = 0.66$; women, $r = 0.70$) is higher than the correlation of the self-ratings.

Quite a different impression is generated by the scale *importance of sexuality*. The self-ratings of the marital partners do not correlate with each other ($r = -0.054$), there being no correlation, therefore, between the importance the marital partners ascribe to sexuality. This fact is also known to women, who perceive no correlation between the importance they ascribe to sexuality and the importance they believe their husbands ascribe to it ($r = 0.006$). For men, however, there is a low, but significant negative correlation ($r = -0.132$). Men perceive a low contrary rating of the importance of sexuality, which is not supported by the correlation of both self-ratings. The greater importance men ascribe to sexuality evidently induces them to experience the existing differences more strongly than is, in fact, justified.

Until now, the time a marriage has existed has not been taken into account. It is, however, expedient to distinguish between various family stages (Duvall, 1967). Investigations (e.g., Burr, 1970; Rollins and Feldman, 1970) have shown that the contentment with various aspects of a marriage varies considerably as a function of the family stage. We can expect these variations to exist for the marriages investigated here, with the correlations between sexuality and variables of the relationship becoming more pronounced during the course of a marriage. This development can be expected principally for women, assuming—as some authors do—that women link sexuality with the quality of the relationship in a partnership. Changes in the general relationship, therefore, would more likely be accompanied by changes in the sexual relationship.

To determine the stages in a family, the following differentiation was made based on existing typologies:

- Stage 1. Beginning families (couple married 0-5 years without children)
- Stage 2. Child-bearing families (youngest child under 3 years)
- Stage 3. Families with preschool children (youngest child 4-6 years)
- Stage 4. Families with school-age children (youngest child 7-14 years)
- Stage 5. Families with teenagers (youngest child 15-18 years)
- Stage 6. Families with grown-up children (youngest child older than 18 years)

The last two stages ("empty nest" and "retirement to death of first spouse") only had a few subjects, so they were not taken into consideration. Table II shows the changes of satisfaction in sexual interaction, importance of sexuality, and marital happiness as functions of family stages.

The changes in the particular scale scores concerned were tested for the two sexes by means of analysis of variance. Only Stages 1-4 were included in the analysis of variance, so as not to allow cell frequency to

Table II. Satisfaction in Sexual Interaction, Importance of Sexuality, and Marital Happiness Related to the Family Stages, Separately for Each Sex (Upper Figure = Mean, Lower Figure = Standard Deviation)

Family stage	Satisfaction		Importance		Marital happiness	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Stage 1 (N = 133)	32.5 4.1	30.1 4.9	16.1 2.6	14.2 3.1	53.9 5.1	52.7 7.4
Stage 2 (N = 139)	30.3 3.6	27.8 5.6	16.3 2.5	13.6 3.3	51.3 7.1	51.3 7.4
Stage 3 (N = 71)	30.9 4.2	28.4 5.8	16.3 3.0	13.1 3.1	51.2 8.2	50.4 8.7
Stage 4 (N = 170)	31.0 4.3	28.0 6.4	16.0 2.7	12.9 3.4	50.9 9.1	49.9 9.8
Stage 5 (N = 27)	30.1 3.6	26.3 6.6	15.6 3.5	11.2 3.8	51.2 7.0	48.6 11.4
Stage 6 (N = 9)	31.6 3.9	27.3 4.1	14.3 2.1	11.3 2.9	52.6 8.1	54.5 5.0

Table III. Analyses of Variance for the Scales Satisfaction in Sexual Interaction, Importance of Sexuality, and Marital Happiness, Separately for Both Sexes (Family Stages 1-4)

Source	Sum of squares	dF	Mean square	F	p
Satisfaction					
Males					
Factor	363.2	3	121.07	7.3	0.0002
Error	8.464.6	508	16.66		
Total	8.827.9	511	17.28		
Females					
Factor	450.4	3	150.1	4.5	0.004
Error	16.879.55	508	33.2		
Total	17.328.95	511	33.9		
Importance					
Males					
Factor	10.3	3	3.42	0.47	0.71
Error	3.665.3	508	7.22		
Total	3.675.5	511	7.19		
Females					
Factor	123.1	3	41.0	3.82	0.01
Error	5.462.6	508	10.75		
Total	5.585.7	511	10.93		
Happiness					
Males					
Factor	826.1	3	275.4	4.78	0.009
Error	29.267.7	508	57.6		
Total	30.093.8	511	58.9		
Females					
Factor	634.7	3	211.6	2.9	0.03
Error	37.203.5	508	73.2		
Total	37.838.1	511	74.1		

become too variable. When the analysis showed a significant result, the means were tested for significant differences with the Scheffé test. The results can be seen in Table III.

It was shown that there were significant changes in all variables except for the variable *importance of sexuality* with the men. The significance of the differences between the various mean scores will not be listed in detail for reasons of space. Here, the congruous result was that a significant change was only demonstrable in all instances for the first stage. With the men, the drop from the first stage to the second was significant for all the variables. With the women, such an immediate drop was only demonstrated for the variable *satisfaction in sexual interaction*. For women, with the other two variables, there were significant differences only in a comparison of Stages 1 and 4. Stage 4, in turn, was not significantly different from the other stages.

At the commencement of a marriage, there are significant differences between the sexes for the variables *importance of sexuality* and *satisfaction in sexual interaction* ($t = 4.3$ for satisfaction and $t = 5.4$ for importance). These differences do not disappear in the course of a marriage. On the other hand, the way the mean scores drop indicates that the corresponding variables do not remain rigid. It appears feasible that the stages of a marriage do have a bearing on the correlations between the variables. Table IV shows the correlation of the sexuality scales as well as appreciation and support, and marital happiness, respectively.

Table IV. Correlations between Sexuality Scales, Appreciation, and Marital Happiness in Relation to the Family Stages (Product-Moment Correlations, Separately for the Sexes)

Stage and sexuality scales	Appreciation		Marital happiness	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Stage 1				
Satisfaction	.489	.516	.448	.341
Importance	.070	.210	-.054	.139
Stage 2				
Satisfaction	.482	.522	.251	.423
Importance	.248	.208	.088	.084
Stage 3				
Satisfaction	.575	.633	.485	.634
Importance	-.061	.336	-.125	.384
Stage 4				
Satisfaction	.537	.603	.461	.469
Importance	.002	.248	-.163	.158
Stage 5				
Satisfaction	.513	.694	.707	.600
Importance	-.155	.508	.113	.551
Stage 6				
Satisfaction	.605	.379	.632	.312
Importance	-.600	.542	.528	.548

The correlation between the two sexuality scales, on the one hand, and the interaction variables, on the other, do not show any significant changes. The relationship between sexuality and interaction and/or happiness become neither closer nor weaker. Interpreting this result is somewhat difficult due to the fact that in some cases the correlations become more pronounced, but the changes are insignificant. This may be due to the relatively low number of subjects in the various stages.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Correlations between personality traits and sexuality scales could be found only for men with the scale *satisfaction in sexual interaction*. Nonetheless, this scale has only minor correlations with extraversion and neuroticism. Eysenck's theory concerning correlations between personality and sexuality is, therefore, not supported by the correlations found. This is not surprising, since Eysenck himself only found minor correlations, as did Farley *et al.* (1977). Singles might have higher correlations, as they may possibly satisfy their needs to a greater extent by changing partners. The results of investigations like the one carried out by Giese and Schmidt (1968) on students, which Eysenck cites as support for his hypothesis, might depend on the characteristics of the samples. Nevertheless, Eysenck himself did not find himself correlations when he had students as subjects. As a consequence, Eysenck's theory appears to carry no weight as far as the description of sexual behavior and experience is concerned.

Thus, sexuality appears to depend more on the quality of the relationship in a partnership. As a precondition, however, the varying importance of sexuality for the sexes has to be taken into consideration. Within the structure of this investigation, no statement can be made as to whether this variation is a genetic one or whether it depends on socialization. The importance of sexuality correlates only for women with variables of the relationship. This result could be interpreted to mean that sexuality is only important for those women who have a secure, positive relationship and can thereby overcome their culturally caused inhibitions.

Satisfaction of sexuality correlates significantly and considerably with aspects of the relationship in a partnership. This correlation remains stable for both partners in the course of the marriage. This means that sexuality depends greatly on the interaction of the married partners. While the importance of sexuality decreases slightly for women in the course of a marriage, the point is, however, that the satisfaction in sexual interaction depends principally on the quality of the partnership for both sexes. This observation might be reversed: In marriage, sexuality is a means to express the continuously more pronounced feelings of appreciation toward the partner. This holds true even for men, who are sometimes suspected of

merely satisfying physiological needs in sexual intimacy. Sexuality for married persons, therefore, depends to some degree on the interaction between the two partners.

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