

Sexual Desire Discrepancy

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Abstract Sexual desire discrepancy is a mismatch between an individual and his or her partner's level of sexual desire. Due to the number of factors that influence the ebb and flow of individual sexual desire, desire discrepancy is a common experience at one time or another in long-term romantic relationships. Although this is a common experience, the research in this area has found consistent links between greater desire discrepancy and lower sexual and relationship satisfaction, indicating a need to find ways to modulate issues of sexual desire discrepancy. Little research has examined sexual desire discrepancy in sexually diverse couples or in clinical populations, and this is an important area for future research efforts. This paper reviews the importance of definitions and measurement of discrepant sexual desire, findings in the role of gender and sexual orientation, and the impact of sexual desire discrepancy on sexual and relational outcomes. Additionally, the treatment of sexual desire discrepancy and future directions necessary to expand this area of research are covered.

Keywords Sexual desire · Sexual desire discrepancy · Discrepant desire · Sexual satisfaction · Relationship satisfaction · Sex drive · Gender similarities · Gender differences

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Introduction

Sexual desire discrepancy, where one member of a couple has higher or lower sexual desire than his or her partner, is a likely experience at some point in most long-term romantic relationships [1•]. Due to the mutual need to connect intimately with a new partner, sexual desire is typically at its highest in the beginning stages of a romantic relationship [2]. Although the research is mixed regarding the maintenance of sexual desire in long-term relationships [3–7], sexual desire has a tendency to fluctuate. These fluctuations occur for a myriad of reasons such as stress, relationship issues, age, hormonal influences, and the addition of children. These fluctuations in sexual desire often occur on an individual level but result in consequences for the couple in the form of desire discrepancy.

Sexual desire discrepancy is most commonly defined as a mismatch between an individual and his or her partner's level of sexual desire [8••]. Although desire discrepancy is one of the most common problems couples present with in sex therapy [9] and desire problems are almost always categorized as relationship problems [10], there has been relatively little research on the topic. Low sexual desire is often cited as the most common sexual problem in women [8••], but desire discrepancy is potentially more distressing than low sexual desire itself [10]. In the context of the treatment of sexual problems, examining discrepant sexual desire focuses attention away from the individual and toward the couple, with the discrepancy as a focus of treatment.

Research has been limited primarily to heterosexual individuals and couples, with only a couple of studies dedicated to sexual desire discrepancy in the context of same-sex relationship dynamics. Considering sexual desire in the context with which it occurs (the couple) is advantageous by allowing the individual with lower sexual desire to be understood within the context of the relationship [11]. This additional context

provides information valuable for considering alternative treatment options [12]. Often the individual who presents with lower sexual desire relative to the partner is pathologized due to their use of the partner's relatively higher level of sexual desire as a benchmark of "normal" [13, 14]. The aim of this review is to provide researchers and clinicians an overview of the sexual desire discrepancy literature to date.

Definitions and Measurement of Discrepant Desire

Conceptualization of sexual desire discrepancy warrants attention to the definition of sexual desire. If sexual desire is defined in purely behavioral terms, frequency of sex or desired frequency of sex may be sufficient (see, for example, the definition of sexual desire provided in 1980 by Zilbergeld and Ellison [10]). However, sexual desire has also been conceptualized beyond desired frequency, particularly when being inclusive of diverse sexual orientations where frequency is not the only marker of quality or satisfaction [15]. Sexual desire has been conceptualized as the motivation to seek out sexual experiences [16], where the object of one's desire may vary considerably [17].

The literature has thus far defined discrepant sexual desire in three ways: 1) discrepancy between desired frequency and actual frequency of sexual behavior, 2) discrepancy between subjective reports of dyadic sexual desire, or 3) participant perceived sexual desire discrepancy. Some researchers have included a measure of whether the desire discrepancy caused problems in the relationship [18], though most others have not. Discrepant desire can be artificially inflated by measuring the difference between a person's desire for sex and the actual frequency of sex because the multitude of reasons other than low desire that could account for sex not taking place (such as limited time, high stress, children, etc.) are left unmeasured. Thus, a lack of sex is not sufficient to determine a lack of desire. Additionally, using frequency as a proxy for desire, and in turn desire discrepancy, is problematic in relationships where consensual unwanted sex occurs [19] or in lesbian couples where frequency may be lower but duration of each event longer [15]. The measurement of discrepant desire directly impacts the findings, and researchers should strive to find ways to become more consistent and accurate in the measurement of sexual desire discrepancy. In future desire discrepancy research, researchers should aim to clearly define desire discrepancy.

Gender, Sexual Orientation, and Discrepant Desire

Traditionally, women have been constructed to be the member of the couple with lower desire relative to their partners in the heterosexual context [20]. Sexual desire is perhaps one of the

most likely constructs to be discussed in a stereotypically gendered way (i.e., men have higher sexual desire than women). This idea stems from a variety of findings such as men initiating sexual activity more frequently than women in casual and committed relationships [19] or that testosterone is higher in men and directly related to desire [2]. This stereotype may lead one to believe that women are more likely than men to be the member of the heterosexual couple with lower sexual desire and that sexual desire discrepancy would be much more common in heterosexual relationships. However, in a recent review of the literature examining gender differences and similarities in sexual desire, Dawson and Chivers [16] concluded that sexual desire is more similar than different between women and men. They concluded that differences in desire found between women and men are most likely due to factors other than desire itself. Research on sexual desire discrepancy in heterosexual couples has also led to mixed results. Some studies have found that men and women are equally likely to be the member of the couple with lower desire relative to their partners [11, 21•, 8•]. Other studies have found that women are more likely than their male partners to have lower relative sexual desire [21•, 22•, 23, 24]. Herbenick and colleagues [1•] suggest that desire discrepancies fluctuate such that sometimes the woman's desire is higher and at other times the man's is higher.

Research on sexual desire discrepancy with sexual minority men and women has been scarce. In 1987, Reece published one of the only papers on sexual desire discrepancies in male couples [25], although it was theoretical rather than data-driven. In this paper, clinical reports of sexual desire discrepancy in gay male couples were similar to descriptions of desire discrepancy in heterosexual couples [25]. Bridges and Horne [18] published one of the only empirical papers on sexual desire discrepancies in same-sex women's relationships. In their investigation of 1072 women in same-sex relationships, women were categorized into problematic discrepant desire, nonproblematic discrepant desire, and equal desire groups. Women who reported problematic discrepant desire engaged in less frequent sex and were less satisfied with their sexual relationships. Despite the assumption that heterosexual couples are most at risk for sexual desire discrepancy, limited research suggests this is not the case. Sexual desire discrepancy, especially when problematic in nature, may be a common experience for all dyads in long-term relationships [1•], regardless of gender or sexual orientation.

Impact on Sexual and Relational Outcomes

Perhaps due to the importance of sexual and relationship satisfaction to overall well-being [26, 27] and the strong empirical evidence that sexual desire is significantly related to sexual and relationship satisfaction [8•, 28•], a good deal of the

research on discrepant desire conducted to date has focused on its impact on sexual and relational outcomes.

Sexual desire discrepancy has consistently been shown to negatively impact sexual and relational outcomes such as sexual satisfaction [11, 18, 21••, 8••, 28•] and relationship satisfaction [11, 8••, 24, 28•]. Desire discrepancy, when defined as a mismatch between desired and actual frequency of sexual activity, is also related to less stability, less positive communication, and more couple conflict among married couples [22•]. These negative sexual and relational outcomes may be more pronounced in longer relationships than shorter ones [23]. Additionally, they seem to impact men and women differently, although the direction of these gender differences is unclear. Greater desire discrepancy, when measured by the difference between subjective reports of dyadic desire, has been shown to impact women's sexual satisfaction [8••, 11], but not men's [8••]. It has also been shown to negatively impact men's relationship satisfaction but not women's [8••]. However, in research where individual level of desire was controlled for, both sexual desire discrepancy and individual sexual desire significantly predicted sexual satisfaction for men only, not women. For women, individual level of sexual desire was more important than sexual desire discrepancy in predicting sexual and relationship satisfaction [28•]. This may indicate that men use their partner's desire as a benchmark for their own and that women's sexual desire is less reliant on their partner in the heterosexual context.

When desire discrepancy is defined as the difference between desired and actual frequency of sexual intercourse, the effects on relationship satisfaction are less clear. For example, Willoughby and Vitas [23] found that when desire discrepancy was measured in this way, greater discrepancy was actually associated with greater relationship satisfaction. However, perhaps this is due to the way desire discrepancy was measured, as this was the case when the individual had a high desire for sexual activity but low actual sexual frequency. They found that this relationship was moderated by gender and relationship length such that it was stronger in women and in longer-term relationships. This study was extended in a sample of married couples [22•], with discrepancies in desired frequency and actual frequency significantly related to lower relationship satisfaction and stability and higher relational conflict. Individual sexual desire discrepancy was negatively related to communication when the husband reported high discrepancy [22•]. The overall findings from Willoughby and colleagues' [22•, 23] work suggest that discrepancies between desired and actual frequency of sexual intercourse have negative implications for a relationship's well-being. Santtila and colleagues [24] measured discrepancies between the desired and actual frequencies of specific sexual behaviors (e.g., masturbation, sexual fantasies, kissing, and petting, etc.) and similarly concluded that greater discrepancies were related to lower relationship satisfaction. The lone exception was

discrepancy between desired and actual frequency of masturbation, which was related to greater relationship satisfaction.

Some research has also examined discrepant sexual desire on an event level through the use of daily experience studies. In the first of such studies, Mark [21••] examined the relationship between the discrepancy of opposite-sex partners' daily subjective reports of dyadic desire and ratings of quality of the sexual experience on the same day. This study found that event-level sexual desire discrepancy was a significant predictor of quality of the sexual experience as rated by women, but not men, such that greater daily desire discrepancies resulted in lower quality of the sexual experience on that day for women. Women's ratings of quality were greater on days where their desire levels were similar to those of the male partner. Day and colleagues [29] examined what they called "sexual interdependence dilemmas," where sexual desire conflict existed in particular event-level situations. Their findings indicated that couples who were motivated to meet their partner's sexual needs were more willing to engage in sex without desire than couples who were less motivated to do so. Additionally, by working to meet a partner's sexual needs in these discrepant desire situations, the overall relationship and sexual satisfaction was enhanced.

Treatment of Discrepant Sexual Desire

Although some couples may be aware of a sexual desire discrepancy and seek treatment directly, others may become aware of the discrepancy when seeking individual treatment for low or less frequently, high sexual desire [25]. Regardless of the route to treatment, discrepant sexual desire should be treated in the context of the relationship. In a desire discrepant couple, the partner who has lower sexual desire may engage in sex with their higher desire partner without the desire for sex [30]. There is some evidence to suggest that engaging in sex even when one does not necessarily desire sex can be good for a relationship [19, 29]. This has the potential to be a helpful approach for couples struggling with sexual desire discrepancy. Research has found that most people who engage in undesired sexual activity with their partners characterize their experiences as pleasant and associated with positive outcomes such as promoting their partners' satisfaction and enhancing relational intimacy [19], especially when they are motivated to meet their partners' needs [29]. However, some do experience negative outcomes such as emotional discomfort [19]. Compatibility is at the core of treating sexual desire discrepancy. It may be helpful to remind couples that their individual preferences will vary at different times, and this is bound to cause incompatibility in even the most satisfied couples [10]. It may also be helpful to reassure couples that desire discrepancy is a natural component of long-term relationships, and sexual desire is expected to ebb and flow [1•, 21••]. With so

many factors contributing to individual sexual desire, a sexual desire discrepancy is bound to occur in long-term relationships. Couples should be encouraged to work together as they clarify individual differences [25]. Additionally, understanding the motivation behind the desire for one's partner can be a helpful task. Research suggests that sexual desire is more than desire for sex [17], and people have sex for a variety of reasons [31]. Forming an understanding of individual motivations within a relationship and finding alternative ways to meet the needs of one's partner when sexual desire discrepancy arises may be a helpful coping mechanism. Desire discrepancy itself may not be problematic [18, 11, 1•], but when discrepancy is deemed problematic by the couple, it can lead to issues that may benefit from treatment.

Conclusion

The research on desire discrepancy thus far has clearly indicated a link between greater discrepant sexual desire and poorer relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and quality of sexual experience. It is likely that most long-term relationships experience sexual desire discrepancy at some point in the course of the relationship, due to the many factors that influence individual sexual desire and the relationship dynamics of a couple. The majority of this work has been conducted in heterosexual samples. Since there are indications that desire discrepancy is not unique to heterosexual couples, additional research is needed in sexually diverse samples. Further, little research has been done with couples with clinically significant desire discrepancies. Additional research utilizing clinical samples would be beneficial in gaining insight into the most effective treatment course. Researchers examining sexual desire discrepancy should carefully consider how they operationalize and measure sexual desire discrepancy to achieve more consistency among researchers and to ensure sexual desire discrepancy is the construct being captured. Sexual medicine clinicians should consider sexual desire in the context of the couple relationship with which it exists. Situating sexual desire discrepancy as a natural part of long-term romantic relationships may be clinically and therapeutically useful as a way to normalize this common experience for couples.

Compliance with Ethics Guidelines

Conflict of Interest The author declares that she has no competing interests.

Human and Animal Rights and Informed Consent This article does not contain any studies with human or animal subjects performed by the author.

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