



The Effects of Self-esteem, Traditional Gender Roles, and Gender on Reward, Intimacy, and Enhancement as Motivations for Sexual Relations

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Abstract

Motivations for sexual relations between partners can be affected by personal and social factors (e.g., culture). These motivations can be distinct according to individuals' perspectives (as inner needs to be fulfilled, or a resource to gain benefits). To examine the effects of self-esteem, sex roles and gender on motivations for sexual relations and to identify and examine a perception of sex as positioned on a spectrum from an instrumental means to achieve some other goal to a goal in and of itself. The survey was accessible through Qualtrics, an online data collection system. Participants were recruited via social media and completed questionnaires on self-esteem, Patriarchal Beliefs Scale and sexual motivations. The study model was assessed using structural equation modeling. Self-esteem was positively associated with intimacy and enhancement motivations and negatively associated with sex as a reward motivation. Traditional sex roles were positively associated with sex as a reward and intimacy motivations. In addition, women engaged in sex as a reward more than men while men engage in sexual intercourse for enhancement more than women. Men also were more likely to have traditional sex role perceptions than women. Breaking down sexual motives into purpose and focus allows for a more nuanced understanding of the motivations behind sexual behavior. By isolating specific characteristics that form sexual motives examining the correlation between different motives, researchers can gain a better understanding of the interplay between sexual motives and its impact on sexual behavior. Furthermore, this conceptualization opens up new avenues for analysis, allowing researchers to examine the specific characteristics of each motive.

Keywords Self-esteem · Patriarchal beliefs · Gender roles · Sexual motives

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Introduction

There are different motivations for sexual relations between committed partners (Cooper et al., 1998; Hill & Preston 1996; Impett et al., 2005). In fact, these variables predict different behavior patterns, and some of those patterns may be detrimental to health and well-being (Cooper et al., 1998). A number of studies have been conducted over the years to classify motives and to examine how these motives affect sexual relations. For example, Cooper et al. (1998) have attempted to map these motives based on their characteristics. This mapping is essential to understanding these motives and the factors that promote or obstruct them (Meston et al., 2007).

The present study aimed to examine the effects of self-esteem, sex roles and gender on motivations for sexual relations, as well as to identify and examine a perception of sex as positioned on a spectrum from an instrumental for achieving personal goals or as a goal in and of itself. Someone who views sex as a means to achieve will mostly view it as a scarce resource and should be supplied to acquire some benefit. On the opposite end of the spectrum, other people perceive sex as a goal and pleasurable activity. Here, it is important to emphasize that we are discussing normative, acceptable relations between committed partners as opposed to coerced sex. These two highly different motives represent the two poles of a spectrum that characterizes sex as a means to some other end or as an independent goal. The enhancement motive (Cooper et al., 1998) is based on a perception of sex as a goal, whereas the reward motive is based on a perception of sex as a means to achieve other goals (Kulibert et al., 2019; Meston et al., 2007; Vannier & O'Sullivan, 2012). Between those two motives, we have the intimacy motive (Cooper et al., 1998), which is more complex and simultaneously relates to sex as both a means to an end and an independent goal. The three motives occupy distinct positions along the spectrum between sex as a means and a goal. To provide a foundation for the proposed model, we need to identify factors that express the proposed motives and that can push the motives in either direction along the spectrum.

Self-esteem

Self-esteem is a character trait based on a person's subjective estimation of their value in comparison to specific criteria, which may not necessarily reflect that person's true abilities or objective accomplishments (Leary & Baumeister, 2000; Trzesniewski et al., 2013; Zeigler-Hill, 2013). The lower a person rates their abilities relative to the standards of significant others, the more negative that person's self-esteem will be (Mann et al., 2004). People evaluate themselves based on their relationships with others and how they believe they are seen by others. The value that people assign to their qualities depends on their beliefs as to how important those qualities are in the perspective of others and the degree to which significant others will react to those qualities, whether positively or negatively (MacDonald et al., 2003).

Self-esteem is an organized knowledge structure that has two main components: content and structure (Campbell et al., 1996). The content component has two parts: (a) “Who am I and what am I?” (e.g., good or bad, negative or positive, valuable or worthless) and (b) “How do I feel about myself?” which can be accompanied by positive or negative feelings (Campbell et al., 1996; Leary & Baumeister, 2000). The structural component relates to the manner in which knowledge or beliefs about the self are organized (Campbell et al., 1996).

It is customary to distinguish between two structures of self-esteem: global and specific. Global self-esteem refers to a person’s general self-judgement and the extent to which that person feels valuable. Specific self-esteem involves the manifestation of global self-esteem in different contexts in which it is relevant, such as academic, athletic, or social self-esteem (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). The commonly used measure of self-esteem, which has been used in many previous studies and this work, is global self-esteem (Trzesniewski et al., 2013). Individuals develop patterns of behavior in different life contexts to increase their self-esteem (Crocker & Park, 2004). This tendency can also be expressed in the sexual behavior of individuals in their intimate relationships.

It can be argued that individuals who have relatively low self-esteem see their capabilities as more limited and feel that they do not have much to offer. These people believe that the little they do possess is valuable and can put it forward, first and foremost, in their own eyes and then in the eyes of others. Therefore, self-esteem can be associated with motivation to engage in sexual relations. The instrumental view of sex will be more strongly expressed in the reward motive and more weakly expressed in the pleasure motive. The view of sex as an independent goal will be expressed more strongly in the pleasure motive and more weakly in the reward motive. Accordingly, the higher a person’s self-esteem, the weaker that person’s reward motive. In contrast, higher self-esteem will be associated with a stronger pleasure motive.

Beliefs that Support Patriarchal Principles

Although self-esteem is internally nested in individuals and influences their behavior, the division of tasks between genders is nested in society and also externally influences the behavior of individuals. This division of gender roles is embedded in the social structures that underlie the behavior of individuals and in particular, the social expectations of men and women of all social classes, starting from the macro level and continuing through the intermediate and micro levels. These expectations exist on a continuum with conservative–traditional societies at one end and liberal–egalitarian societies on the other. These social structures create and preserve the balance of power between genders. In patriarchal societies on the conservative–traditional end of the spectrum, men hold a central position, which allows or demands them to be dominant and in control of all life aspects. At the same time, this structure places women at the margins and demands that they accept male authority and obey instructions given by men (Hunnicot, 2009). The distribution of

power between men and women affects their behavior, even in their most intimate relationships (Winstok, 2012).

Because this study addressed relationships between committed partners, it focused on the micro measure of beliefs that support the patriarchal structure at the micro level and are expressed in the conservative–traditional division of labor between the genders.

Relations between committed partners differ greatly between conservative–traditional societies and liberal–egalitarian societies. Whereas conservative–traditional societies demand obedience to collectivist, external obligations that are not subject to compromise, such as religious obligations, liberal–egalitarian societies operate according to social forces that promote individualism. According to the conservative approach, marriage and reproduction are fundamental obligations that are intertwined with each other and fulfilled through intimacy and sex in marriage. Pleasure is not rejected, but it is also not required and therefore, may not necessarily play a central role in the motivation to engage in sexual relations. Despite the fact that conservative principles apply to both genders, in conservative societies, women seem to be viewed as more responsible for upholding these principles and assigned greater blame for any failure to do so. As compared to the liberal–egalitarian approach, the conservative–traditional approach is more likely to promote a perception of sex as a means to an end, as opposed to a goal. Accordingly, the stronger the conservative attitudes, the stronger the reward motive, especially among women. The intimacy motive may also be influenced by the obligation to engage in intimacy that lies in the attitudes that support a traditional division of gender roles. This is related to the fact that conservatism views intimacy as a social obligation, whereas liberalism views intimacy as a personal right. Therefore, stronger conservative attitudes will be associated with higher levels of the intimacy motive. However, as has already been argued, the pleasure motive that views sex as an independent goal will not be affected by such attitudes.

In sum, the main claim made in this work is that the different motivations to engage in sexual relations with a partner are located in distinct positions along a central yet not exclusive continuum, with an instrumental view of sex on one end and a view of sex as an independent goal on the other. The instrumentalist view of sex reflects the reward motive and the view of sex as an independent goal reflects the pleasure motive. Between those two motives, we find the intimacy motive, which includes a mixture of the other two motives.

To evaluate that claim, two inherently distinct factors were examined in this work: the personality trait of self-esteem and beliefs that support patriarchal principles, which are reflected in traditional gender roles. The relationship between these two factors and gender-related motives can indicate support for the hypothesized continuum on which those motives are located. The relationships between these factors and motives are presented in Fig. 1.

A stronger reward motive will be associated with lower self-esteem and stronger belief in patriarchal principles. On the other hand, a stronger pleasure motive will be associated with higher self-esteem. Beliefs that support patriarchal principles will have a minimal (if any) effect on the pleasure motive. A stronger intimacy motive will be associated with higher levels of self-esteem and stronger beliefs that support

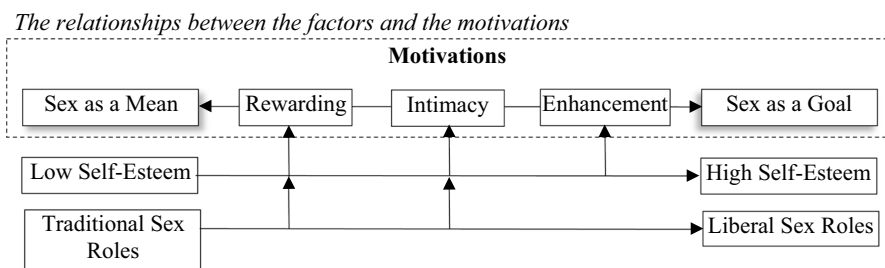


Fig. 1 The relationships between the factors and the motivations

patriarchal principles. We also hypothesized that there will be a negative correlation between the pleasure motive and the reward motive and a positive correlation between the pleasure motive and the intimacy motive.

Method

Procedure

A convenience sample of men and women was recruited via social media (Facebook and Instagram). The survey was open from June 1 to August 25, 2022, and took an average of 10 min to complete. The survey was accessible through Qualtrics, an online data collection system that offers security and ease of use. Participants' data were not linked to recruitment sources. Institutional review boards at the affiliated university approved all procedures and instruments.

Cohabiting with a current partner for at least 12 months and being between 25 and 50 years old were the inclusion criteria. To participate in a study on sex, sexuality, and intimate relationships, participants were invited to click on the survey link. When potential respondents clicked the survey link, they were directed to a page that provided information regarding the study's purpose, questions, and consent form (i.e., the survey was voluntary; participants could skip any questions or quit at any time; responses would be anonymous). As part of the first page, participants received information on how to contact the researcher and details about mental health crisis centers. This information would be useful if they felt distressed and in need of mental health assistance. Participation in the study was not compensated.

Ensuring Diversity

To retain a diverse sample, the study targeted sexual groups regardless of age. (By posting the study in social media outlets). In addition, two requests targeted specific populations, one aimed at Ethiopians and another at Arab groups in Israel. These groups trend toward conservatism more than the other focal populations. To ensure different groups could share in the survey, it was distributed in the two main languages of Israel, Hebrew and Arabic. Recruiting Arabs to a study about coitus

and fornication is a sensitive issue and thus, we didn't announce the study on social media to recruit that group but rather, we used particular connections to exploration group members, who were asked to share the link to the questionnaire with their networks (snowball sample).

Participants

The sample featured 675 men and women who reported being in an intimate sexual relationship for the past 12 months or more. The sample was 54% female and 45% male. The Hebrew language questionnaire was used by 78.5% of participants and the Arabic one by 21.5%. Most participants were born in Israel (88.3%); the rest were born in other countries, such as Ethiopia (2.9%). The average age of research participants was 38.79 years ($SD=7.46$). The sample involved mainly Jewish participants (73.9%). Other participants were Muslim (14.5%), Druze (7.6%), Christian (2.7%), and another religion (1.3%). The various religiosity levels reported were nonreligious (36.1%), secular-traditional (21.3%), religious (18.7%), and orthodox (3.6%). The participants' education levels were as follows: 1.8% reported less than 12 years of schooling, 11.7% reported a high school education, 48.9% had an undergraduate degree, 31.9% had a graduate degree, and 5.8% had a doctoral degree. Research participants also shared their sexual orientation: 82.8% heterosexual, 5.9% mostly heterosexual, 2% same-sex, 6% mostly same-sex, 0.2% bisexual, 0.2% pansexual, 0.2% asexual, 0.5% not known, 3.2% other, and 3% decline to state. Most participants were married to their partners (79.3%); 14.7% cohabited but were not married and 6.1% reported living separately. The average relationship tenure in years was 11.35 ($SD=7.52$). The average number of children was 2.33 ($SD=1.65$). Economic status tended to be high: 11.6% with lower than average, 61% with average, and 27.4% with higher than average economic status. The characteristics of this sample indicate a tendency toward a middle-high status.

Measures

Intimacy and enhancement as motivations for having sex were measured by two of six subscales of the Motivations for Sex Scale developed by Cooper et al. (1998). This scale measures motivations or reasons for having sex. In the current study, two motivations were measured: intimacy and enhancement. These motivations have positive consequences on the marital relationship, including the sexual relationship. In the present study, the introduction to the positive motivation questions states: "This part of the questionnaire deals with different reasons for having sex with a partner. Mark how often you have sex for each of the reasons listed below." As in the original measurement, the intimacy motivation measurement included five items, such as "I had sex to increase the intimacy between me and my partner." The enhancement motivation measure included four items, such as "I had sex because it feels good." The tested statements were rated using a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*almost always*). In the present study, the intimacy motivation measurement's internal consistency was expectable (Cronbach's $\alpha=0.93$), as was the

enhancement motivation measurement's internal consistency ($\alpha=0.89$). New variables were encoded for each motivation type based on the average of research participants' responses.

Sex as a reward is a motivational measure for having sex to reward a partner for something the partner did or will do. This measurement was developed as an addition to the six motivations that Cooper and colleagues (1998) developed and tested. Development of these items for the current study was based on consultation with clinical experts and gaps in the literature. The principles guiding the development of the measure were consistent with those underlying the measurement of Cooper et al.'s (1998) sexual motives. The introduction to this measurement and its items were the same as the measurement of the intimacy and enhancement motivations. The measurement included six items, such as "I had sex because I got what I wanted from him." A new variable was encoded based on the average of research participants' responses. The variable's encoding and validation are presented in the findings section. In the present study, the measurement's internal consistency was expectable ($\alpha=0.97$).

Questions about sex roles were based on the Patriarchal Beliefs Scale developed by Yoon et al. (2015). This instrument measures the respondent's degree of agreement with patriarchal ideologies situated at three levels of social systems: micro level (e.g., family, domestic roles), meso level (e.g., school, local community), and macro level (e.g., state politics, major companies). Only the micro-level subscale was used.

Internal consistency of the 11 items was confirmed in two follow-up studies (Yoon et al., 2015). The Patriarchal Belief Scale has shown usefulness in several other research (e.g., Tripathi, 2020; Yoon et al., 2020). The items are rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate a greater endorsement of patriarchal beliefs.

A gendered domestic roles (11 items) measure assessed beliefs in gendered roles in the family. Included in this measure are statements like: "A man should control the household finances."

The 10-item Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) was used to assess global self-esteem. The items are rated on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*), such that higher scores indicate higher levels of self-esteem (range 10–40). The instrument has shown acceptable internal consistency in previous studies (Moksnes & Reidunsdatter, 2019). Cronbach's alpha for the scale in the present study was 0.89.

Data Analysis

Means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlation coefficients were examined. The research model was tested with structural equation modeling using AMOS 27. Model fit was assessed by five indexes: chi-square and normed chi-square tests to assess the model's overall fit and parsimony (normed chi-square values equal to or less than 2.0 indicate a good fit); comparative fit index (CFI), Tucker-Lewis Index (TLI), and normed fit index (NFI), which are incremental fit indexes; and root

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and range of study variables (N=675)

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Possible range
Self-esteem	3.28	0.48	1–5
Traditional sex roles	2.0	0.89	1–5
Sex to reward	2.4	0.62	1–5
Intimacy	3.67	0.84	1–5
Enhancement	3.73	0.76	1–5

Table 2 Pearson correlations of the study variables (N=675)

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Respondent sex						
2. Self-esteem	0.06					
3. Traditional sex roles	−0.14**	0.04				
4. Sex to reward	0.19**	−0.19**	0.13**			
5. Intimacy	0.02	0.18**	0.13**	0.06		
6. Enhancement	−0.08*	0.21**	0.06	−0.20	0.45**	

Note. * $p < 0.05$. ** $p < 0.001$

mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) and its confidence interval (CI), which measures the discrepancy per degree of freedom and indicates the model's absolute fit. In addition, indirect effects were evaluated using a bootstrapping method (5,000 bootstrap samples) and 95% bias-corrected CIs to evaluate the statistical significance of indirect paths.

Results

The means, standard deviations, and ranges of the study variables are presented in Table 1. The mean levels of self-esteem and intimacy and enhancement motivations were relatively high, whereas mean scores for traditional sex roles and sex as a reward were relatively low.

Table 2 shows the correlations for the study variables. Sex as a reward was associated with all study variables in this study (respondent sex, self-esteem, traditional sex roles, and enhancement motivation) except intimacy motivation. Intimacy motivation was associated with self-esteem, traditional sex roles, and enhancement motivation. Finally, enhancement motivation was associated with self-esteem, respondent sex, and intimacy.

Study Model

In the first step of the study model assessment, the associations between the outcome variables (three motivations: sex as a reward, intimacy, and enhancement)

and background characteristics were examined to determine which background variables should be controlled. Only gender was associated with the outcome variables. Therefore, gender, self-esteem, traditional sex roles, sex as a reward, intimacy motivation, and enhancement motivation were added to the model. Links between the model variables that were not statistically significant were omitted. The fit parameters showed a high goodness of fit: $\chi^2=6.11$, $df=4$, $p=0.19$; $\chi^2/df=1.52$; NFI=0.98; TLI=0.96; CFI=0.99; RMSEA=0.03, 90% CI [0.07, 0.09]. Then, the effects (unstandardized and standardized) were tested for size and statistical significance, using a bootstrap of 5000 samples. The model is described in Fig. 2.

The model identified several direct effects in accordance with the first hypothesis: Self-esteem was positively associated with intimacy and enhancement motivations and negatively associated with sex as a reward (the higher the self-esteem, the higher the intimacy and enhancement motivations and the lower the sex as a reward motivation). In accord with the second hypothesis, traditional sex roles were positively associated with sex as a reward and intimacy motivations (the higher the traditional perceptions, the higher the intimacy and sex as a reward motivations). However, traditional sex role perceptions were not associated with the enhancement motivation. In addition, respondent sex was positively associated with sex as a reward motivation (women engaged in sex as a reward more than men) and negatively associated with enhancement motivation (men engage in sexual intercourse for enhancement more than women) and traditional sex role perceptions (men were more likely to have traditional sex role perceptions than women). Finally, enhancement motivation was positively associated with intimacy (the higher the enhancement motivation, the higher the intimacy) and negatively associated with sex as a reward motivation (the higher the enhancement motivation, the lower sex as a reward motivation).

The study model

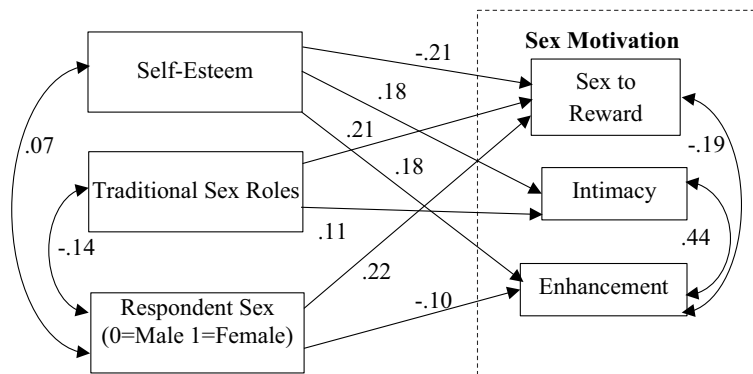


Fig. 2 The study model

Discussion

The current study examined how self-esteem and patriarchal beliefs may influence three main motivations for engaging in sexual intercourse, which are, sex as a reward, intimacy and enhancement. Our results were consistent with the theoretical background. A stronger reward motive was associated with lower self-esteem and stronger belief in patriarchal principles. On the other hand, a stronger enhancement motive was associated with higher self-esteem. As well, a stronger intimacy motive was associated with higher levels of self-esteem and stronger beliefs that support patriarchal principles. In addition, we found a negative correlation between the enhancement motive and the reward motive, as well as a positive correlation between the enhancement motive and the intimacy motive.

In terms of self-esteem, the findings of this study were consistent with previous research that found, participants with lower self-esteem reported engagement in sex for reasons other than self-expression motives (e.g., they had to please their partner, gain a benefit) (Kong et al., 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2008). A possible explanation for this, is that the lack of self-esteem may lead to the unjustified feeling that sexuality is all what a partner has to offer. Therefore, this internal belief can drive people to treat sex as a transaction of benefits, and engage in sex even when they don't have the natural instinct motive for it. Having self-esteem, on the other hand, allows to engage in sex based on natural desires (e.g. enhancement, intimacy etc.), which, in turn, enhance self-esteem even further.

Our results also showed that stronger patriarchy beliefs are positively correlated to both intimacy and reward motives but not to the enhancement motive. To the best of the author's knowledge, the relationship between patriarchy beliefs and sex motivations has not been examined in previous studies. Meanwhile, there is evidence that sex motives may differ across cultures. For example, Tang (2011) argued that cultures differ in the way men and women are socialized and in how they perceive the sexual motives, whether acceptable or unacceptable. People from individual cultures are more concerned with pleasure and stress reduction than people from conservative-traditional cultures. Conversely, people from conservative-traditional cultures are more concerned with pleasing their partner and maintaining a close relationship. A possible explanation for this is that relations between committed partners differ between conservative-traditional societies and liberal-egalitarian societies. In conservative-traditional societies, marriage and reproduction are fundamental obligations that are intertwined with one another. They are to be fulfilled through intimacy and sex within marriage. Pleasure is not rejected, but it is also less required and, therefore, may not necessarily play a central role in the motivation to engage in sexual relations. As compared to the liberal-egalitarian approach, the conservative-traditional approach is more likely to promote a perception of sex as a means to an end, as opposed to a goal in and of itself.

This study is of great importance as it offers a new conceptualization for studying and thus understanding sexual motives. The results support the idea of conceptualizing sexual motives based on the motivations of sexual activity as a

purpose, namely, ultimate goal or a mean, as well as the focus which represents the degree of selflessness or selfishness involved. Breaking down sexual motives into purpose and focus allows for a more nuanced understanding of the motivations behind sexual behavior. By isolating specific characteristics that form sexual motives, researchers can gain a better understanding of the interplay between sexual motives and their impact on sexual behavior. Furthermore, this conceptualization opens up new avenues for deeper analysis, allowing researchers to examine the specific characteristics of each motive alone.

The findings also showed a negative correlation between the enhancement motive and the reward motive, as well as a positive correlation between the enhancement motive and the intimacy motive. We used an analytical approach to understand sexual motives by establishing several principles. According to these principles, if sexual motives share similar purpose and focus, they are likely to demonstrate a positive and significant correlation. Conversely, if the motives have distinct purposes and focuses, they will show a negative correlation. The strength of the correlation will be greater if the motives share the same purpose and focus. A lack of significant correlation may be due to conflicting goals and focuses among the motives, while a positive significant correlation may be observed if the motives overlap in either their goal or focus, even if there is contradiction in the other aspect.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study should be considered big in light of its serious limitations. In the first place, this study was based on self-report measures which are subject to biases resulting from response biases and variances arising from shared method. Another limitation was related to the design of the study; this was a cross-sectional study examining patriarchy beliefs, self-esteem and sexual motives. Consequently, no causal relationship could be established regarding associations among the study variables. Another limitation of this study as well as many other studies examining motivations was that the unit of analysis is individual and not dyadic. As a result of this approach, we were not able to understand how rewarding sex affected both partners. As such, more research is needed to investigate the long-term impact of rewarding sex on partners and on the overall relationship, from a dyadic perspective.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest None.

Ethics Approval Institutional review boards (IRBs) at the authors' university approved all procedures and instruments.

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