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Is it Good to be Giving in the Bedroom?

A Prosocial Perspective on Sexual Health and Well-Being in Romantic Relationships

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Keywords

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Abstract

Satisfying sexual interactions are a crucial predictor of the quality of romantic relationships and satisfaction with life. At the same time that sex can lift couples up and bring them great pleasure, navigating the sexual aspects of their relationship can be quite challenging for some couples, as conflicts of interest such as desired sexual frequency are among the most difficult types of relationship conflict to resolve. A prosocial perspective on sexuality suggests that partners who are highly motivated to respond to each other's needs and provide each other with sexual benefits can maintain desire, even over the long term, as well as navigate sexual problems in their relationship with greater success. This article addresses two central questions, including *why* people are motivated to provide their romantic partner with sexual benefits and the relationship and sexual outcomes of doing so, as well as *who* is most likely to be giving in the bedroom. This perspective on sexuality has important clinical applications, including unique extensions to individuals with sexual dysfunctions, as well as the psychological and sexual well-being of affected couples.

Introduction

> ". . . this is the first time in the history of humankind where we are trying to experience sexuality in the long term, not because we want 14 children . . . and not because it is exclusively a woman's marital duty. This is the first time that we want sex over time about pleasure and connection that is rooted in desire."
>
> ~Esther Perel, *Mating in Captivity*

The maintenance of sexual desire and passion over time has not always been a requirement of long-term relationships. Historically, marriage primarily served economic and procreation purposes [1]. In recent decades, however, sexual fulfillment—for both men and women—has become an expectation of long-term love [2]. In addition to being best friends, confidantes, primary sources of social support, and co-parents, partners are expected to be sexual lovers—and good ones at that. Yet people have busy lives; amidst demanding work schedules, household responsibilities, and caring for children, finding time for—and cultivating an interest in—sex can be challenging for many couples. Issues of sexual frequency, quality and satisfaction may be even more challenging for couples facing sexual dysfunctions such as those who experience clinically low levels of sexual desire, anorgasmia, and sexual pain, as these couples typically experience more difficulties communicating about their sexuality than those who do not have these problems [3-4].

With modern expectations regarding the role of sexuality in marriage and long-term relationships, it is essential to understand how couples can cope with and respond to the inevitable changes in sexual interest that they face over the course of their relationship, as well as how they can maintain sexual desire, satisfaction and healthy sexual functioning in the face of these changes. In addition to being mindful of, accepting, and pursuing one's own

sexual pleasure, it is also important that relationship partners learn to focus on the experience of giving to each other and delighting in one another's pleasure. Similarly, when one person experiences a sexual dysfunction, it does not occur in isolation: the partner is also affected by and can affect the development, maintenance, and recovery from the problem. The prosocial perspective on sexuality advanced in this article suggests that partners who are highly motivated to respond to each other's needs and provide each other with sexual benefits can maintain desire, even over the long term, as well as navigate sexual problems in their relationship with greater success.

Sexual Challenges and Opportunities in Romantic Relationships

Ironically, while powerful feelings of sexual attraction are often what motivate people to initiate romantic relationships [5-6], these initial feelings of sexual attraction frequently diminish over time. Empirical research reveals that sexual desire tends to peak in the beginning stages of romantic relationships as intimacy is rapidly developing [7], and then tends to declines over time as partners become more secure and comfortable in the relationship [8-10]. As a result, romantic partners will inevitably encounter times in which their sexual interests differ [11-15]. For example, couples may disagree about when and how frequently to engage in sex or the specific activities in which they wish to engage [16-17]. In a national study of couples married fewer than five years, disagreements about sexual frequency were one of the top three most cited arguments between partners [18]. Research has also shown that it is common for one partner to experience chronically higher levels of sexual desire than the other partner [11,14,19], and that couples in ongoing romantic relationships experience at least some degree of discrepancy in sexual desire on five out of seven days per week [20].

These sexual conflicts and discrepancies in sexual interest, if left unresolved, have the potential to create lasting tension in romantic relationships [21-24]. Not surprisingly, conflicts of interest about sex are one of the most common reasons why couples seek marital therapy [25], and couples indicate that sexual disagreements are among the most difficult types of conflict to successfully resolve [26]. Clinical opinion has long been that low sexual desire, which often results in discrepancies of desire in couples, is one of the most difficult sexual dysfunctions to treat, although randomized controlled trials to substantiate this claim are severely lacking [27]. Still, low sexual desire/arousal continues to be the most common female sexual disorder and is prevalent in men as well, and it is the most frequent presenting problem in sex therapy clinics [28-30].

At the same time that couples face many challenges in navigating the sexual aspects of their relationship, it is also clear that satisfying and pleasurable sexual interactions are a huge contributor to both relationship and life satisfaction [8,31-32]. In both dating and married couples and across the lifespan, people's satisfaction with their sex lives is closely linked with their feelings of satisfaction with their relationship as a whole [23,33-37]. Further, couples who enjoy positive, satisfying sexual relationships have longer lasting relationships than couples who are less sexually satisfied or who report experiencing sexual problems [23,38]. The importance of sex for the quality of relationships, coupled with the challenges that many couples face maintaining desire and satisfaction over the longer term, highlights the need to understand how couples can maintain and reignite sexual desire, which can in turn inform researchers and clinicians in the development of targeted interventions for those experiencing sexual dysfunctions and associated distress. Indeed, while sexual desire and frequency are known to decline over the course of relationships [10,21], not all couples experience these

declines [39], and not everyone experiences accompanying declines in relationship satisfaction [10,40]. Even for the many romantic partners who experience discrepancies in sexual desire, have divergent sexual interests, or experience a sexual dysfunction, some are able to navigate these differences with greater success and maintain relationship and sexual satisfaction in the face of these difficulties [41-44].

Prosocial Motivation in the Domain of Sexuality

A prosocial perspective on sexuality provides insight into how some couples are able to stave off declines in sexual desire or remain satisfied in spite of partners experiencing considerable differences in their sexual appetites and interests. At the core of this perspective is the idea that romantic partners are dependent on each other to meet their sexual needs. Perhaps no other relationship domain involves more dependence between partners than the domain of sexuality, given that the majority of long-term couples are monogamous and therefore can not—or are not allowed to—get their sexual needs met outside of their current relationship. As such, partners in ongoing, committed relationships have a unique and important role to play in meeting and fulfilling one another's sexual needs [45-46].

Situations in which partners experience conflicting interests—such as when partners experience a discrepancy in their desire for sex—provide important information about people's motivation to pursue their own self-interests versus promote the interests of their partner [47-49]. In these situations, interdependence theory, a prominent social psychological theory of close relationships, suggests that a person's first impulse is to pursue their own interests, but that in close relationships, people often transform their motivations from focusing on what is best for themselves to focusing on what might be best for their partner or their relationship more broadly [50-51]. This enhanced focus on what people can give to their

partner as opposed to what they personally have to lose contributes to enhanced relationship satisfaction for the giver and enhanced trust among relationship partners [52-53].

This review applies these ideas regarding the benefits of prosocial giving to the domain of sexuality by addressing *why* people engage in sex to meet their partner's needs and *who* is most likely to do so, as well as implications for the maintenance of sexual desire and satisfaction, especially as couples navigate conflicts of sexual interest that might arise over the course of their relationship. An understanding of the role of prosocial behavior in sexuality may also inform potential targets for intervention in clinical populations experiencing sexual dysfunction. This review focuses on sexual motivation in consensual, but sometimes undesired, sexual encounters in the absence of explicit or immediate partner pressure [13,54-55]. While engaging in consensual, undesired sex has the potential to be associated with undesired consequences such as reduced relationship satisfaction, especially when women engage in sex to avoid relationship conflict [54], engaging in consensual, undesired sex also has the potential to strengthen intimacy in relationships [13,55]. In the absence of explicit pressure by a romantic partner, engaging in sex to provide a partner with benefits can create unique opportunities for partners to express love, enhance intimacy, and build trust in their relationship.

Why Are People Giving in the Bedroom? The Role of Approach and Avoidance Motives

There are a variety of reasons why people choose to engage in sex—or goals that motivate sexual behavior—and some of the most commonly endorsed reasons by both men and women include feelings of sexual attraction to another person or desires to experience physical pleasure [56]. In the context of romantic relationships, interpersonal goals, such as desires to express love and please one's partner, are at least as common as goals that involve

the pursuit of physical pleasure [56-57]. Some researchers use approach-avoidance motivational theory [58] to classify the varied reasons why people engage in sex into a smaller number of meaningful categories. This theory contrasts *approach goals*—which, in the context of relationships, involve pursuing positive experiences such as a partner's pleasure or increased intimacy—and *avoidance goals*—which involve averting negative experiences such as a partner's disappointment or relationship conflict [59]. Applied to the domain of sexuality, approach goals for sex focus on obtaining positive outcomes such as one's own physical pleasure, a partner's pleasure, or greater relationship intimacy [57,60]. In contrast, avoidance goals focus on averting negative outcomes such as avoiding sexual tension, a partner's loss of interest, or relationship conflict. It is important to point out that people can have multiple motivations for engaging in sex, with some approach and others avoidance in nature. That is, people can pursue a given sexual interaction both to create intimacy but also to avoid conflict. Indeed, results of a daily experience study of individuals in dating relationships revealed that approach and avoidance sexual goals were not significantly associated—either on a given day, or between persons [60]. In other words, individuals who report high levels of approach sexual goals do not necessarily report low (or high) levels of avoidance sexual goals, and vice versa.

Studies of dating, cohabiting, and married couples have documented the emotional and relational benefits of engaging in sex for approach goals, as well as the costs of avoidance goal pursuit [60-61]. Daily experience studies have revealed that people report experiencing greater positive emotions, relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction on days when they engage in sex for approach goals more than they typically do in their relationship, but more negative emotions, higher relationship conflict, and less sexual satisfaction on days when they

engage in sex for avoidance goals [60-61]. Because approach and avoidance goals were not correlated in this study, this means that on days when people pursued sex for both types of goals, they tended to experienced mixed outcomes—both costs and benefits to their emotional experience and the quality of their relationships. Further, research that has followed couples over time has shown that when people chronically pursue avoidance goals in their relationships, they are more likely to break up [60], and couples who choose to remain in their relationships are less satisfied with their relationship [61] and less satisfied with their sexual experiences several months later [61]. This work suggests that the chronic pursuit of avoidance sexual goals can be detrimental to the maintenance of relationships over time.

It is perhaps intuitive that the pursuit of sexual goals focused on avoiding negative outcomes will not be as beneficial for a person's own feelings about their relationship as pursuing goals focused on creating positive outcomes. But what is perhaps less intuitive is that people also experience poorer sexual and relationship outcomes to the extent that their romantic *partner* engages in sex with them to pursue avoidance goals. Indeed, two daily experience studies in which both members of dating, cohabiting, and married couples completed records of daily sexual activity every day for a three-week period revealed that when people engaged in sex for approach goals, they experienced higher levels of sexual desire which, in turn, fueled relationship satisfaction as reported by *both* members of the couple [61]. In contrast, having sex for avoidance goals detracted from daily sexual desire, which in turn, eroded both partners' feelings of satisfaction and closeness during the sexual experience. In addition, the results of this study showed that people who engaged in sex more frequently for avoidance goals over the course of the daily experience study had partners who felt less sexually satisfied and committed to maintaining their relationship four months later.

Research has also shown that sexual outcomes are not only impacted by people's goals for engaging in particular sexual interactions, but also by their more general goals for their relationship as a whole. In a six-month longitudinal study, people who strived to achieve approach goals in their relationships, such as heightened intimacy, growth, and connection with their partner, maintained high sexual desire over time, whereas those with lower approach goals experienced the more typical declines in sexual desire over time [62]. Further, people who held strong approach relationship goals were even able to maintain high levels of desire on days when they experienced conflict and disagreements with their partner. These results suggest that behaviors motivated by approach goals are not only beneficial when things are going well in relationships, but even more importantly, during the inevitable times when couples experience conflict.

Although there are certainly benefits of approach goals, it is important to note that research has revealed more consistent effects of avoidance goals than approach goals, especially over time. In one study, whereas approach sexual goals were associated with increased desire and satisfaction for both partners during a sexual experience, only avoidance goals predicted decreases in relationship quality and sexual desire over time [61]. These findings are consistent with a large body of psychological research suggesting that negative experiences can have a more powerful impact than positive experiences [62]. Indeed, in stable marriages the ratio of positive events to negatives events is 5:1 [63], suggesting that five times as many positive interactions are needed to balance negative interactions [64]. In addition, although avoiding conflict in a relationship may provide some immediate benefits, conflict avoidance can be detrimental to relationship satisfaction over time [65].

Although many studies have documented the benefits of approach goal pursuit and the costs of avoidance goal pursuit, it is possible that there are some circumstances under which engaging in sex for avoidance goals is not always costly. Although no work has directly examined this possibility, related research on sacrifice in romantic relationships provides some insight into this question. In a study of college students, individuals with an interdependent self-construal—that is, those whose sense of self was inextricably tied to important relationships [66]—were buffered against the emotional and relationship costs of engaging in daily sacrifices for avoidance goals such as to avoid conflict with a partner [67]. This work suggests that for people who are highly interdependent, the pursuit of avoidance goals is not always costly, perhaps because sacrificing for a partner allows these individuals to maintain the harmony in relationships that they so highly value. Future work is needed to determine if these same effects would be documented in the domain of sexuality.

In sum, this growing body of work on approach and avoidance sexual motivation and close relationships provides support for the idea that giving to a partner in the bedroom can feel good for people, if done in pursuit of particular types of goals. Specifically, when people engage in sex to please their partner and enhance intimacy in the relationship, both partners feel more satisfied with their sexual experiences and their relationship as a whole.

Who is Most Giving in the Bedroom? The Role of Communal Motivation

Not everyone is motivated to provide their partner with sexual benefits, and certainly not across all situations, suggesting that there might be important individual differences in the extent to which people are motivated to try to meet their partner's sexual needs. The theory of communal motivation suggests that in communal relationships—such as those we have with family members, romantic partners, and close friends—people provide care non-contingently,

that is, they give care to each other with little concern for what they will receive in return [68]. Further, this theory suggests that people give to their partner insofar as the personal costs incurred in meeting their partner's needs are reasonable and they trust that their partner will be responsive to their own needs when they arise [69].

Recently, theories of communal motivation have been applied to the sexual domain of relationships. *Sexual communal strength* is the extent to which people are motivated to be non-contingently responsive to their partner's sexual needs [45]. Qualitative research has shown that people high in sexual communal strength are more likely to engage in sex with their partner when they are not entirely in the mood, be open-minded about their partner's preferences, communicate with their partner about their sexual likes and dislikes (learn about their partner's preferences and share their own), and ensure that partners are mutually responsive to one another's sexual needs [70]. Somewhat paradoxically, their focus on meeting the needs of others leads to increased benefits for the self. For example, in a sample of long-term couples, sexual communal strength was positively associated with sexual desire and satisfaction [45-46]. Further, communal individuals also maintained sexual desire over a four-month period of time in long-term relationships. Whereas people lower in sexual communal strength experienced declines in sexual desire, those people who were more highly motivated to meet their partner's sexual needs began the study with slightly higher desire and were able to maintain sexual desire over time [45]. This finding is quite remarkable given that the average relationship duration of couples in this study was 11 years, and desire is known to precipitously decline with increased relationship duration [8].

Perhaps more intuitively, the partners of people higher in sexual communal strength also reap important benefits. People with communally motivated partners report that their

partners are, in fact, highly responsive to their needs during sex and in turn, they feel more satisfied with and committed to their relationships [46]. Additional evidence regarding the benefits of focusing on meeting a partner's needs comes from related research on *sexual transformations* [71]. In one study, participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they change their sexual habits for the sake of a romantic partner, such as engaging in sex more frequently than they might desire, as well as how satisfied they feel with making such changes [71]. People who indicated that they made more frequent sexual transformations had romantic partners who reported being more satisfied with their relationship. In addition, above and beyond the frequency of making sexual transformations, the extent to which people felt positive about changing their sexual habits for a partner was associated with both partners' relationship satisfaction [71], suggesting that both willingness as well as satisfaction with sexual changes promote increased relationship satisfaction in romantic couples.

One the most stringent tests of the potential benefits of sexual communal strength is whether communally motivated people are still willing to meet their partner's needs in situations in which partner's sexual needs and interests *differ*. It is one thing for communal people to report that sex is highly satisfying when both partners' passions are running high; it is quite another to remain focused on meeting a partner's needs when, for example, one partner is experiencing a sexual problem such as low desire. Results of a three-week dyadic daily experience study of community couples showed that even on days when people reported lower sexual desire than their romantic partner, those high in sexual communal strength indicated that they would be more willing to engage in sex, and reported increased sexual and relationship satisfaction when they did engage in sex, relative to less communal people [20]. Most strikingly, people high in sexual communal strength remained satisfied even on days

when they engaged in sex but their desire was lower than their partner's desire. Whereas less communal people experienced lower sexual satisfaction on days when they engaged in sex but were not in the mood compared to days when both partners experienced similarly high levels of sexual desire, people high in sexual communal strength felt equally sexually satisfied on days when their desire was similar to their partner's desire and on days when they were less sexually enthused than their partner. These results are important because they show that communal people do not just give and benefit from giving when it is easy, but also when it is relatively more difficult. Although this study investigated daily fluctuations in desire in couples not currently experiencing clinically diagnosed sexual problems, by extension, these findings suggest that sexual communal strength may be a protective factor for maintaining satisfaction in couples coping with a sexual dysfunction. Indeed many individuals experiencing sexual dysfunctions are not distressed by them and remain sexually satisfied [72].

This work is not meant to suggest that partners should *always* be willing to meet one another's sexual needs. People who are communally oriented are not only motivated to meet the needs of their partner, but also hope and expect that their partner will be similarly motivated to meet their *own* needs. Although the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs can be beneficial for both partners, the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs to the *exclusion* of one's own needs is unlikely to be beneficial for either partner in the relationship. Indeed, research on unmitigated communion [73]— the tendency to give to others without concern for one's own needs—has shown that individuals high in unmitigated communion experience more negative affect and less positive affect in situations of interpersonal conflict [74]. This work has been extended to the domain of sexuality to show that whereas people

who are high in sexual communal strength and their partners report higher relationship and sexual satisfaction, people high in *unmitigated sexual communion* (e.g., people who indicate that they cannot sleep if they do not meet their partner's sexual needs) and their partners do not reap these sexual or relationship benefits, and in some cases report more negative sexual experiences [75]. These results suggest that, in the context of ongoing romantic relationships, it may be especially important to strike the right balance between being responsive to a partner's needs and asserting one's own needs. Given that sexual assertiveness is associated with higher sexual desire, arousal and satisfaction in both men and women [76], navigating this balance may be particularly challenging for those struggling with any kind of sexual dysfunction, ranging from low desire/arousal to erectile dysfunction to sexual pain. These individuals and couples may therefore benefit from interventions aimed at enhancing their approach sexual goals and sexual communal strength.

Applications to Clinical Populations

The existing research on the benefits of being giving in the bedroom in community couples forms an empirical basis for investigating these factors as potential targets for intervention in clinical populations experiencing sexual dysfunction, including those who have difficulties with desire, arousal, orgasm, and pain. There is little knowledge of the sexual motivations of individuals with sexual disorders, with the exception of insights gained from a small number of studies among women experiencing sexual pain [77-79]. The investigation of prosocial motivational factors is an important avenue for future clinical research because it may increase the efficacy and quality of interventions aimed at improving the sexual well-being of affected individuals and couples.

Epidemiological studies indicate that as many as 80% of women who experience pain during sexual intercourse continue to engage in regular intercourse with their intimate partners [80]. Non-population-based studies of individuals with other sexual dysfunctions suggest that they also continue with partnered sexual activities on a regular basis, albeit at a lower frequency than community samples [81]. Although those struggling with a sexual dysfunction such as pain typically report high satisfaction with their relationship overall [44], studies have documented that this problem constitutes a significant relationship stressor. Women have reported feelings of guilt and inadequacy as a romantic partner [82], and in one study, 73% of male partners of women with sexual pain reported that the pain negatively affected their relationship [83]. Considering the motivational context of their sexual behaviors may shed light on whether persisting with regular, at times unwanted but consensual, sexual activity is beneficial or harmful to the individual and the couples' sexual and relationship well-being. Although women who have sexual pain likely have the goal of avoiding this pain, qualitative research has shown that they also report engaging in sex to feel close to their partner, to satisfy their partner's sexual needs, and to avoid losing or disappointing their partner, suggesting that both approach and avoidance goals, and sexual communal strength are relevant to this population [78].

Yet the sexual goals of individuals experiencing sexual dysfunction may be more frequently based on avoiding negative outcomes than the goals of community couples. One study found that women with self-reported recurrent pain during intercourse endorsed more goals for engaging in intercourse related to mate guarding (i.e., wanting to protect or keep their partner) and concerns about duty/pressure, both of which are conceptually avoidance-motivated in nature, compared to controls [77]. Moreover, a comparison of approach and

avoidance goals in community samples to a sample of couples in which the woman was diagnosed with vulvodynia (chronic, unexplained vulvar pain) indicated that while both partners' levels of approach goals were high in both samples (M = 5.44 out of 7 in a vulvodynia sample vs. 5.62 in community samples), both women and their partners reported higher avoidance goals on average (3.96 for women and 3.52 for partners on a scale of 1-7) compared to typical scores in community samples (1.76) [61,79]. This discrepancy in the average frequency of avoidance goals underscores the potential salience and negative impact of avoidance-motivated sex among those struggling with sexual problems.

In a study of women with vulvodynia and their romantic partners, women's pursuit of avoidance goals was associated with lower sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction, as well as with greater depressive symptoms [79]. In addition, the partners of women with vulvodynia who reported higher avoidance goals also reported lower relationship satisfaction. This constant focus on avoiding negative outcomes may direct women and their partners to attend more to the negative aspects of the sexual experience, such as the pain, and may exacerbate the negative outcomes couples are trying to avoid (e.g., couple conflict or negative affect), interfering with their sexual, relational and psychological functioning [79,84]. In contrast, women who engaged in sex more frequently for approach goals reported greater sexual and relationship satisfaction [79]. Women who experience painful intercourse are often avoidant of intimate displays of affection and all kinds of sexual activities for fear that these activities could lead to pain [82, 85]. Holding stronger approach sexual goals for any sexual activity (especially those which are non-painful) may enable women to attend less to the possibility of pain and derive more enjoyment from all sexual activity and by extension their overall relationship. Further, given that it is typically recommended that women with genital

pain refrain from vaginal intercourse until they have implemented pain coping skills, those with stronger approach goals may be better able to adapt their sex lives to the sexual pain, which is often accompanied by other sexual problems including lower desire, arousal, and difficulties with orgasm [86]. For example, couples may expand their sexual repertoire to include more non-penetrative sexual activities, or increase the amount of time spent in pleasurable, arousal-inducing foreplay. Consequently, both members of the couple might experience better psychosexual and relationship outcomes.

In the presence of a sexual dysfunction, it may become more challenging for an individual to be responsive to their partner's sexual needs, particularly if they believe that their own sexual needs are not being met. In other words, it may be more difficult for affected individuals to be sexually communal. In a population-based sample of over 5,000 Finnish women, 10% reported that their partner had sexual needs that they did not want to satisfy. Endorsing this item was significantly associated with having a sexual dysfunction and being sexually distressed [87]. Moreover, in a large study of female adolescents who reported experiencing pain during intercourse, 47% reported continuing intercourse despite the pain, 33% did not tell their partners about the pain, and 22% feigned enjoyment [88]. The primary reason for persisting with intercourse was to prioritize the partner's sexual enjoyment above one's own [88]. Women reporting pain during intercourse also report that their partner's satisfaction is more important than their own [78, 82]. These findings suggest that young women who experience painful intercourse might be particularly high in unmitigated sexual communion. Indeed young women often feel a societal pressure to undervalue their own pleasure and focus on the partner's pleasure, which can negatively impact their own satisfaction [89].

Although we currently know very little about the role of sexual motivation in sexual dysfunctions beyond sexual pain, the clinical implications and recommendations are likely to be relevant for many sexual disorders, especially given the strong evidence for its role in sexual desire and satisfaction in community couples. Clinicians working with individuals and couples coping with sexual dysfunction should consider using cognitive-behavioral, acceptance, or emotion-focused strategies to assist couples in identifying and focusing on their approach sexual goals and reducing the salience of avoidance sexual goals, thus diminishing the negative consequences to both partners' psychosexual and relationship functioning. Specifically, clinicians could encourage clients to monitor their reasons for having sex, noting any links between their goals and sexual experiences. They should facilitate a discussion of the clients values in relation to their sexual relationship, and assist clients in shifting their goals in such a way as to live their life in accordance with those values. For example, a client who identifies relationship intimacy as an important value in his or her life could be encouraged to consider how engaging in sex out of a desire to feel close to a partner would be more consistent with this value than engaging in sex to avoid conflict. Another important consideration for therapists is to explore how the sexual goals of each member of the couple match up or align. Identifying discrepancies between partners' sexual goals could provide opportunities for correcting maladaptive or inaccurate beliefs (e.g., "my partner only ever wants to have sex with me for his own pleasure") and fostering better communication and intimacy.

In working with clinical samples, it is especially important to distinguish between a healthy focus on meeting a partner's needs (i.e., sexual communal strength) and an over-focus on a partner's needs (i.e., unmitigated sexual communion). The therapeutic goal should not be

to promote meeting a partner's sexual needs while negating one's own, but rather to identify the sexual needs and values that are important to both members of the couple, such as giving and receiving pleasure and building intimacy, and to help couples identify ways to be intimate that are consistent with those values. Sexual self-disclosure and empathic responsiveness may be important ways for couples to maintain sexual desire and satisfaction over the course of long-term relationships [90] or when facing a sexual dysfunction [91]. In response to an open-ended question about the strategies they use to meet their partner's needs, communal people indicated that they try to learn about a partner's sexual likes and dislikes and incorporate what they learn into their sexual activities [70]. Interventions that elicit self-disclosure of sexual needs, increase sexual assertiveness, and foster partner empathic responding might enhance sexual communal strength in couples. Clinicians can facilitate sexual self-disclosure and assertiveness by teaching communication skills and through behavioral exercises such as sensate focus. Therapists could also assist couples in understanding what each person requires in order to feel validated, cared for, and accepted in relation to their sexual preferences and desires.

Conclusions and Future Directions

The prosocial perspective on sexuality advanced in this article is novel and gives rise to several important directions for future research. In the future, researchers could explore the strategies that allow couples to manage sexual disagreements most successfully. One promising direction for this line of inquiry involves interviewing desire-discrepant couples who are both struggling and thriving to determine which strategies preserve as opposed to detract from relationship intimacy. Two of the most commonly reported strategies used by women to modulate sexual desire (i.e., enhance their own desire or manage desire

discrepancies with a partner) reported in a recent study were enhancing communication and trying to meet their partner's needs [92]. The clinical literature on marriage has also shown that a combination of compromise and acceptance can help distressed couples improve their relationship satisfaction [93]. Applied to the sexual domain of relationships, romantic couples may aim to make changes to their sex life based on each other's sexual preferences or desired sexual frequency, when reasonable, in order to reach a compromise. Possible changes may include engaging in sexual activities that one partner enjoys, but are not the other partner's preferred activity, or compromising on how frequently the couple engages in sex by pursuing sex at a frequency that is somewhere in between partners' desired frequency. At the same time, however, partners may also aim to accept the things that the other person is not willing to change. For example, if one partner is interested in a specific sexual activity, but their partner does not feel comfortable, they may have to accept that this activity will not be part of their sexual relationship.

Most of the research on sexuality from a prosocial perspective has focused on the relationship and sexual outcomes when people *engage* in sex. There is currently very little research investigating how and why people decline their partner's sexual advances, as well as whether some ways of delivering sexual rejection are better able to preserve relationship intimacy and closeness. On the flip slide, we also know virtually nothing about how people can remain satisfied in the face of receiving sexual rejection from their romantic partner. In short, almost all of the existing work on sex and relationships has focused on what happens when people *do* have sex, and almost none of it has looked at what happens when people *do not* have sex—and if there are particular ways of rejecting a partner and responding to rejection that can help couples preserve or reignite intimacy.

Another important direction for future research is to examine the extent to which prosocial motivation in the domain of sexuality is malleable and can be enhanced to the ultimate benefit of relationships. Two recent experimental studies provide initial support for the possibility that both sexual communal strength and approach and avoidance sexual goals can be modified. One study using scenarios showed that people rate others as having higher sexual desire and sexual satisfaction when they think they have engaged in sex for approach as opposed to avoidance goals [61]. In another study, people who were asked to write about all of the things that they do to meet their partner's sexual needs, in comparison to those in a control condition, reported that they would experience greater sexual and relationship satisfaction when engaging in sex with their partner when they have low sexual desire [20]. Both of these studies are limited in that they relied on the use of scenarios, and it is certainly challenging to conduct experimental work and measure real-world sexual outcomes. One promising possibility is to provide couples with information about the benefits of approach goals and focusing on meeting a partner's sexual needs to determine if this knowledge would positively impact their own sexual lives. Determining when it is possible to enhance people's approach sexual goals or communal motivation has important implications for improving couples' sexual relationships and for establishing novel targets of intervention in sex and couples therapy.

In today's world, some people expect more from their romantic relationships than ever before [94], including sexual fulfillment. Although high expectations about sexuality can benefit relationships [95], expectations that are difficult or impossible to meet can be a liability [94,96]. The work reviewed in this article suggests that in addition to holding reasonable expectations for a partner's ability and motivation to provide sexual pleasure and

satisfaction, another important route to positive sexual and relationship outcomes is the motivation to provide one's partner with sexual benefits.

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