

A Dyadic Model of Caregiving and Sexual Functioning in Partners Seeking Couples' Therapy

Introduction

General context

- Over 60% of couples seeking relationship therapy experience **clinically significant sexual distress** (Brassard et al., 2012).
- Given the deteriorations in sexual well-being reported by these couples, and the **close link between sexual satisfaction, relationship adjustment, and overall health** (Birnbaum et al., 2006; Byers, 2011; Sprecher, 2002), efforts to better understand the factors associated with distressed couples' sexuality seem highly justified.

Caregiving and sexual systems

- Caregiving** refers to a set of behaviors aimed at providing **comfort, reassurance, and support** to one's partner in times of adversity (Mikulincer & Goodman, 2006).
- The **association between the caregiving and sexual behavioral systems** has received wide support from a theoretical perspective (Bowlby, 1982; Mikulincer, 2006; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Shaver et al., 1988).
 - However, very few studies have examined the link between caregiving and sexual well-being empirically.
- A study by **Péloquin et al. (2014)** has explored the associations between four dimensions of caregiving (proximity, sensitivity, control, and compulsive caregiving) and sexual satisfaction in couples within the general community, through the lens of attachment theory.
 - They **found several associations** between these variables (e.g. caregiving proximity mediated the link between attachment insecurities and sexual dissatisfaction), supporting the theorized association between these systems.
 - This study, however, hasn't examined **sexual function**, which represents an important facet of human sexuality.

Objectives

- Given that **distressed couples** are more likely to experience problems in **sexual functioning** (Péloquin et al., 2019) and that relational distress **may disrupt caregiving processes** in couples (Feeney & Collins, 2001), examining the link between caregiving and sexual functioning in a clinical sample of couples seems highly relevant.
- Therefore, using a **dyadic framework**, the present study examined the associations between **perceptions of received and given partner support and sexual function and satisfaction** in couples seeking couples therapy.

Method

Participants

- 299 opposite-sex couples** who began relationship therapy
- Mean age:** 43.6 years old for men and 41.5 years old for women (range: 22 to 76 years old)
- Average length of the relationship:** 13.9 years (range: 0 to 49 years)
- Marital status:** 44.8 % are married
- Mean number of children:** 1.8 for men and 1.7 for women
- Occupation:** 94.3 % of men and 87 % of women are currently employed

Procedures

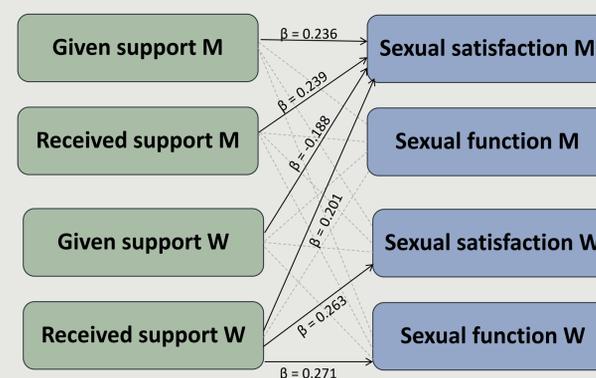
- Couples were recruited by **their therapist** during their first assessment session in a private clinic that offers couples' therapy.
- Both members** of the couple completed a series of questionnaires individually using the secure web platform **Qualtrics Research Suite**.

Questionnaires

- Given and received support** were measured using the **Conjugal Support Questionnaire (CSQ)** (Brassard, Houde, & Lussier, 2011)
- Overall sexual satisfaction** was assessed using the **Global Measure of Sexual Satisfaction (GMSEX)** (Lawrance, Byers & Cohen, 1998)
- The **Arizona Sexual Experience Scale (ASEX)** (McGahuey et al., 2000) was used as a measure of sexual function (ability to experience desire, orgasm, and arousal).

Results

Links between caregiving (given and received support) and sexual functioning (satisfaction and function) in both partners



Analyses

- Path analyses based on the actor-partner interdependence model (APIM)** (Kenny et al., 2006) were conducted to test the links between caregiving and sexual functioning for each member of the couple.

Results

- Men's** perceptions of **support given** to their partners as well as their perception of **received support** were **positively** related to their **own sexual satisfaction**.
- Women's** perceptions of **given support** were **negatively** associated with their **partners' sexual satisfaction**.
- Women's** perceptions of **received (not given) support** were **positively** related to their **own sexual function and satisfaction**, as well as the **sexual satisfaction of their partners** (but not their sexual function).

Discussion

- These results highlight the association between **both partners' perceptions of received and given support and sexual satisfaction in men**, therefore reinforcing the theorized association between caregiving and sexual well-being. The surprising association between women's provision of support and their partners' lower sexual satisfaction could perhaps be explained by the type of support that women provide. Because these couples experience significant relationship problems, men may perceive their partners' "helpful" behaviors as controlling or unhelpful (Péloquin et al., 2014).
- Men's sexual function does not seem, however, to be related to caregiving. We could hypothesize that **men's sexual satisfaction** is more reliant on psychological factors than sexual function, and is **more sensitive to caregiving variations**.
- Women's sexual satisfaction and function** seem to be mostly **linked to women's own perceptions of received partner support**. The absence of link between women's given support (and perception of men's received support) and sexual functioning could be explained by the fact that women assume **caregiving roles** more often (twice as much as other family members; Keating, 1999) and experience **more negative consequences from it** (distress, anxiety, isolation, etc.; Armstrong & Kits, 2004; Bookwala & Schulz, 2000; Cheung & Hocking, 2004; Harris, Adams, Zubatsky, & White, 2011; Piquart & Sorensen, 2006). This could potentially **take away the benefits of given caregiving** on sexual satisfaction and function.
- Our findings provide a **dyadic portrait** of the link between caregiving and sexual functioning in distressed couples, which could have significant **clinical implications** for interventions aimed at improving these **couples' relational and sexual well-being**.