

The Role of Sexual Desire on Differentiation of Self and Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

Relationship satisfaction can produce negative and positive outcomes that impact physical and psychological well-being. Predicting relationship satisfaction was investigated by understanding the level of differentiation of self and sexual desire in married individuals. This study further examined the moderating role of sexual desire on differentiation of self and relationship satisfaction. Individuals participated in surveys related to differentiation of self, sexual desire, and relationship satisfaction via Amazon Mechanical Turk. The study found a combination of research findings. Significant findings indicated higher differentiation of self-predicted lower relationship satisfaction, contrary to what the study originally hypothesized. There was no support that higher sexual desire predicted greater relationship satisfaction. Additionally, higher sexual desire as a moderating variable strengthened the association between differentiation of self and relationship satisfaction negatively. This study suggested sexual desire is not influential in creating relationship satisfaction even when differentiation of self is high.

Keywords: differentiation of self, sexual desire, relationship satisfaction, marriage

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Chapter 1

Love rests on two pillars: surrender and autonomy. Our need for togetherness exists alongside our need for separateness. One does not exist without the other.

With too much distance, there can be no connection. But too much merging eradicates the separateness of two distinct individuals. (Perel, 2007, p. 55)

Relationships, and the overall satisfaction within them, are an inherent human need. A route in finding purpose in life can often serve as the journey of pursuing meaningful connections with the self and others. Navigating the path of fulfilling one's needs, wants, and desires by seeking trusting and serious partnerships allows people to grow an understanding of how they love others, how they love themselves, their ability to love, and the love they wish to receive. Relationships have the ability to expose people to their blind spots and vulnerabilities in ways that challenge them to grow mentally and emotionally. The goal in seeking satisfactory romantic relationships offers a platform for people to practice and express themselves authentically, and to connect in ways that offer space for the other to feel heard and seen too. Fulfilling romantic relationships can lead to a sense of belonging and stability when partners are able to create meaning within their connection and have shared values. The ability to form a romantic partnership provides an outlet for the expression of connection through emotional and physical intimacy.

Not only do relationships serve as a biological drive to evolve the human race and create community, but relationships also function as a social and psychological protector from despairing medical and mental health concerns. Satisfaction in romantic relationships is considered a public health concern as positive and negative outcomes effect both physical and mental well-being for partners (Beach et al., 2003). Research on

relationship dissatisfaction in married couples has acknowledged that a pattern of conflict increases with relationship discord when an attempt to repair a dispute is responded through a negative emotional reaction (Gottman, 1998). Symptoms of depression (e.g., sadness, irritability, diminished interest in sex) have also been associated with dissatisfaction in relationships (Beach, 2001). Another significant factor in relationships is the ability to regulate emotions and integrate needs of autonomy and togetherness (Bowen, 1978). Such aspects play an important role in relationship satisfaction (Skowron, 2000). Sexual desire is also relevant to relationship satisfaction as the experience of desire can be layered and unique for each individual. As the nature of sexual desire is complex and deeply interpersonal, aspects of desire can often be a source of relationship dissatisfaction as physiological, cognitive, and emotional components play a central role in desire expression. Sexual frequency has also been a source of physiological stress when partners comply with sexual activity more often than they desire (Hartmann & Crockett, 2016). Couples therapy may be the reality for those who feel dissatisfied in their partnerships, experience desire discrepancies, or have relational conflict. Further knowledge about predicting relationship satisfaction will be investigated through understanding partner individuality and sexual desire in married individuals.

Additionally, the overall health of an individual may signify health of a partnership. Thus, exploring satisfaction and desire in romantic relationships can help researchers, clinicians, and couples understand areas that impact mental, emotional, and physical well-being. To deepen the awareness on this subject, theories of differentiation of self, attachment, interdependence, and sexual responding will provide a framework for understanding relationship satisfaction in romantic relationships.

Operational Definitions

Differentiation of self is a multifaceted personality construct from the systemic and multigenerational framework in Bowen theory. *Differentiation of self* is defined as the ability to find an equilibrium between emotional and intellectual functioning, and balance between intimacy and autonomy in relational dynamics (Bowen, 1978; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998). The construct further captures the ability one can recognize thoughts from feelings and self-regulate processes that accompany intellectual and emotional responses. Individuals with higher degrees of differentiation have the tendency to experience strong emotions from logical standpoints that enable them to shift in a calm and sensible way. Highly differentiated individuals tend to be more adaptable and cope better with stress.

On the contrary, individuals who are poorly differentiated are inclined to have difficulty keeping calm when experiencing the response of another's emotions, coined as *emotionally reactive*. Emotionally reactive individuals tend to fuse their intellectual and emotional processes together and base their decisions on what feels right in the moment. In terms of intimacy and independence, highly differentiated individuals trend toward taking I-positions. This is indicative of having a strong sense of self and maintaining one's convictions and boundaries permitting intimacy without fear. Thus, poorly differentiated individuals have an inclination for engaging in fusion or emotional cutoff. Fusion is characteristic of feeling stuck in the family system, having few convictions, dogmatism, seeking acceptance and approval, and separation being perceived as overwhelming. Individuals who are personified as being emotionally cut off tend to

isolate themselves emotionally from others and display a façade of independence; such individuals view intimacy as a threat.

Relationship satisfaction has largely been defined by self-reporting measures. For this study, relationship satisfaction is indicative of one's general subjective evaluation of the relationship (Graham et al., 2011).

Sexual desire is a multifaceted construct that is still difficult for experts in the field to define and assess. One understanding of sexual desire can be defined as one's overall interest in sexual activity (Spector et al., 1996). Spector et al. (1996) acknowledged sexual desire is a cognitive construct, measured by the intensity of one's thoughts toward responding to sexual stimuli. Thus, sexual desire does not encompass a behavioral element that can be measured directly by analyzing sexual behavior. Moreover, sexual desire involves understanding an individual's personal motivators and cognitions that enable one to seek out sexual opportunities or acts. Societal pressures, communication patterns, and individual factors are important to consider as they play a central component in desire expression (Basson, 2000).

Theoretical Orientation

Differentiation of Self

Differentiation of self is a construct within Bowen family systems theory that explains interrelated domains of functioning on an intrapsychic and interpersonal level (Bowen, 1978). Within this model, the intrapsychic aspect in differentiation of self applies to the individual's ability to recognize the difference between thoughts and feelings while simultaneously being able to choose how one responds to those thoughts and feelings. Functioning on the interpersonal level in differentiation of self relates to

one's ability to preserve the balance of maintaining needs of intimacy and autonomy (Bowen, 1978). A fundamental quality in stable romantic relationships, as emphasized by family systems theory, is the ability to support emotional and intellectual functioning with the balance of intimacy and autonomy needs (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Individuals who are more differentiated tend to have healthier levels of independence in their relationships. Such individuals also have an improved ability to respond to relationship pressures and maintain a greater sense of self in context of their romantic relationship. Thus, the experience of fears of abandonment or enmeshment are not characteristic of individuals who are highly differentiated in context of their relationships (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

On the contrary, individuals lower in differentiation may have difficulty regulating emotional reactions when confronted with relationship stressors. Such individuals may withdraw from their significant others or find it difficult to support them in times of need without feeling a loss of independence (Bowen, 1978; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). As the construct of differentiation of self is fundamental in emotional regulation of self and one's needs, attachment style can also explain how one responds or reacts in relationships (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).

Attachment Theory

Attachment styles are formulated in childhood and can serve as basis for how one engages with others. In infant-caregiver relationships, John Bowlby originally pioneered the framework for attachment theory, which was later expanded on by the contributions of Mary Ainsworth. Attachment theory consists of three elements: attachment behavior, attachment behavioral system, and the attachment bond (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).

Attachment behavior refers to proximity one has to an attachment figure. The attachment behavioral system describes how an individual organizes and understands attachment behaviors within themselves. The attachment bond is indicative of an affectionate connection which the individual conceptualizes internally.

Affectional bonds are a specific type of bond stated to be persistent across the lifespan in friendships and romantic relationships (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Such bonds typically involve a specific person who is not replaceable with another. Within the affectional bond, the individual has an attraction for the other person. As a result, the dynamic in the relationship is significantly emotional, and the individual aspires to maintain a level of proximity or contact with the other individual. Desire for maintaining proximity with another person may vary on internal and external conditions. When an individual experiences distress, it may be derived by an involuntary separation from the other person. However, distress may still be experienced when an individual chooses separation. This is the notion that the individual desires proximity with the other person, but it is hindered. Additionally, individuals tend to seek security and comfort with another person during times of distress, and secure attachment indicates when the individual attains security wanted. Insecure attachment acknowledges the nature of seeking security and comfort and not receiving it (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016).

Individual differences to achieving security can also be conceptualized through attachment-related anxiety or avoidance (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Those with attachment anxiety may be more vigilant and insecure and respond with heightened distress when they are unable to access their loved one. Moreover, individuals on the anxiety spectrum may experience fears of rejection and abandonment. Individuals with

attachment avoidance may have the propensity to withdraw emotionally in conditions where they are vulnerable, which may feel more soothing to them than seeking proximity to a loved one. Such individuals may feel uncomfortable with intimacy or closeness and strive for independence and emotional detachment. Avoidant attachment styles may be fearful or dismissive in their patterns of relating. Thus, fearful-avoidants may experience greater anxiety than those who are dismissive. Conversely, those with secure attachment styles have few doubts in their self-worth and view others as trustworthy and responsive to their needs (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016). Attachment styles indicate the starting point for the basis of human connection. Through self-awareness and potential therapeutic treatment avenues, individuals can learn to evolve into a more secure base to benefit the health of the relationship and the self.

Interdependence Theory

In understanding dyadic relationships, interdependence theory provides a solid ground to analyze the interaction of consequences individuals experience (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Consequences are evaluated through a set of positive and negative components, characteristic of rewards and costs. The subjective experience of analyzing rewards and costs in a relationship are dependent on meeting acceptable standards the individual has based on their experiences with other relationships. Attraction, dependence, and status are standards individuals may identify within the relationship. The tendency to interact with another individual is a highly selective process that reflects the premise of interaction to be mostly satisfactory and to repeat over and over again. Interacting with another individual is based on the premise that less satisfactory engagements will disappear. Consequences of interactions are acknowledged by positive

components (e.g., gratifying, satisfying, pleasurable factors) a person receives and negative components to which a person is subject. When costs are perceived as high, the greater the person's behavior is inhibited or deterred. The more a person has to overcome actions that accompany shame and anxiety, the more the individual is required to compete with forces that create a significant amount of physical or mental effort. The interaction outcomes of rewards and costs are highly dependent on behaviors both individuals produce during the dynamic of interaction. Thus, interdependence theory posits interactions may be scaled with high rewards and low costs, and low rewards and high costs, derived by the behavior of oneself or by the behavior of the other person (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). The pursuit of connection in romantic relationships has the perception that good interactions will outweigh the bad. This states feelings are experienced as pleasurable based on the actions of oneself or other. This further results in both individuals investing some form of effort to continue the benefits of engagement. On the contrary, when the bad outweighs the good, effort to avoid interaction may be high because reward for engaging produces an experience that is perceived as more negative or anxiety producing.

Sexual Response Cycle

Masters and Johnson (1966) were the first to pioneer sexual behavioral research, providing a framework full of nomenclature to define and describe the physiological changes of sexual responses in men and women. As theorized, Masters and Johnson established the sexual response cycle, which consists of four independent phases to explain the physiological reactions to sexual stimuli. The sexual response cycle includes

the following phases: (a) excitement phase, (b) plateau phase, (c) orgasmic phase, and (d) resolution phase.

The excitement phase of the sexual response cycle is rooted in stimulation of somatogenic and psychogenic nature (Masters & Johnson, 1966). For the excitement phase to progress to the next sexual response phase, stimulation is a significant extending factor. When stimulation is perceived as adequate, response intensifies for the individual. However, although this phase can be accelerated, it can also be shortened or interrupted if stimulation is physically or psychologically insufficient or unpleasant. If stimulation is maintained as adequate, the plateau phase of the sexual response cycle is characteristic of intense sexual tension that may lead to orgasm. The duration of the second phase varies widely as it is dependent on duration of stimulation and drive to carry out the sexual tension. Thus, the orgasmic phase is reached with a short involuntary sexual release of an orgasm. Women experience orgasm in the clitoral body, vagina, and uterus region. Men experience orgasm in the penis, prostate, and seminal vesicles.

The experience of orgasm varies expansively in intensity and duration for women on an individual level, while men have less variation in their experiences of ejaculation. If sexual tension is not released with an orgasm, the individual may decrease away from the plateau phase into the resolution phase. Lastly, the resolution phase returns the individual to an unstimulated state. However, women are more likely to have a brief resolution phase where they may have potential to reach another orgasm with sufficient stimulation. Thus, restimulation during the resolution phase is much lower for men than women after orgasm has been reached (Masters & Johnson, 1966). Masters and Johnson (1966) provided a basis for the underpinnings of sexual arousal in the field that was

largely based from a biological perspective; however, the model lacked an emotional and mental component on which other models later expanded.

Kaplan's Model of Sexual Response

Kaplan (1977) expanded on the work of Masters and Johnson (1966) and divided the sexual response cycle into three phases of desire, excitement, and orgasm. Although Masters and Johnson focused on treating individuals derived from sexual dysfunction in the excitement phase, Kaplan noticed in her clinical work that individuals with sexual desire disorders failed to improve over the course of treatment. Kaplan conceptualized sexual desire as having a sexual appetite similar to experiencing hunger or thirst. Thus, the techniques put in place by Masters and Johnson were not helpful regarding desire inhibition as tools. Techniques were largely based on mechanical stimulation as opposed to underlying psychological forces. In other terms, the ability to manipulate and alter sexual desire may be deeply rooted in other motivating factors that inhibit the individual sexually (Kaplan, 1977). Kaplan's work suggested sexual desire and sexual arousal were not mutually exclusive and synonymous with one another; thus, the two terms were independent and context based.

Dual Control Model

Janssen and Bancroft's dual control model of sexual response understood the fluctuating variables in response patterns for individuals. The variability was conceived to be dependent on sexual arousal and related behaviors between factors that sexually excite or inhibit (Janssen, 2007). In this model, researchers postulated that individuals process what excites or inhibits them in a given situation through sexual response, which determines whether the individual responds sexually or not. The model incorporates how

two neurophysiological systems activate or suppress one's response through the autonomic nervous system either sympathetically or parasympathetically. The dual control model acknowledges the role of excitement factors is both subject to state- and trait-like elements, which illuminates how sensitive or responsive one's sexual system is. The variability of sexual desire within the dual control model attempts to conceptualize what variables accelerate or block response patterns through various arousal and contextual domains (Janssen, 2007). Janssen and Bancroft's model acknowledged complex variables that sexual desire and arousal encompass, explaining unique factors individuals may experience during sexual encounters to which one is sensitive.

Current Research in the Field

Differentiation of Self and Sexual Desire

Two subscales on the Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI) examined the influence of gender effects on emotionally cutoff and reactive tendencies in devoted relationships (Price et al., 2020). In the study, emotionally cutoff and emotional reactivity were both correlated with relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and sexual desire. The sample included 668 middle-aged married couples, and research findings indicated there were varying levels of differentiation of self for men and women, specifically in emotionally cutoff and reactivity domains. Women were significantly elevated in emotional reactivity compared to men. Men, however, endorsed significantly higher degrees of emotional cutoff than their female counterparts. Lower levels of differentiation of self were correlated with higher degrees of being emotionally cutoff and emotionally reactive. Displaying more characteristics of emotionally cutoff attributes impacted relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction greater than emotional reactivity. Men

and women's relationship satisfaction and sexual outcome were negatively impacted by emotional cutoff proclivities. Men who endorsed lower emotional cutoff were associated with an increase in relationship satisfaction with oneself and partner, and an increase in sexual desire. Correspondingly, relationship satisfaction and emotional cutoff was negatively associated for women. This further highlighted important characteristics to address in men who disconnect and withdraw in relationship. The authors showcased the damaging factor of emotionally cutoff tendencies and its negative impact on the health of a relationship and sexual desire. Additionally, when women had higher levels of emotional reactivity in committed relationship, it elicited an increase in sexual desire for men (Price et al., 2020). The study did not find an association for women's sexual desire and differentiation of self as it did for men.

Ferreira et al. (2016) examined individual and dyadic levels of discrepancies in sexual desire and differentiation of self. They further analyzed relationship satisfaction and gender differences. The study included 33 heterosexual couples. All participants were married or in a committed partnership. Sexual desire, differentiation of self, and couple's satisfaction were surveyed through snowball sampling over a social media platform. Ferreira et al. proposed individuals have the inclination to choose partners with similar degrees of differentiation of self; however, this proposal was unfounded in the study as couples were found to select partners on a spectrum of differentiation and sexual desire levels. Women also perceived themselves as being the partner with lower sexual desire compared to men. However, Ferreira et al. found couples with similar degrees of differentiation of self tended to have higher levels of sexual desire. Altogether, research findings concluded similarities in differentiation of self was a protective factor for

relationship satisfaction and promotion of sexual desire in couples. When couples had a greater sexual desire discrepancy, levels of differentiation tended to be lower than when couples were more similar in their sexual desire. A greater sexual desire discrepancy was not related to greater couple's satisfaction and was suggested to be an indication of conflict in the relationship. Hence, similarities in differentiation were more predictive of individual sexual desire, suggesting even if partners both had low levels of differentiation, sexual desire might be better for these couples than for couples who had mismatched levels in differentiation of self.

In a qualitative study conducted by Ferreira et al. (2015), couples were interviewed on features that contribute to processes and mechanisms that evolve and change sexual desire and differentiation. Ferreira et al. addressed domains that interpose or assist factors in sexual desire and differentiation. The study aimed to examine paths that promote sexual desire and the perception that couples notice between their personal level of differentiation of self and sexual desire. Researchers additionally asked couples about changes in their desire and differentiation of self across the duration of their committed relationships. Couples were invited to be interviewed about their committed romantic relationships; interviews took place in the comfort of their homes. The interviews were organized into five sections through a semistructured format. The topics of these sections encompassed the couple's experiences of intimacy, sexual desire, and differentiation of self with a focus of the underlying tenors and expectations. For couples to understand the function of the clinical and theoretical concept of differentiation of self, two vignettes and a definition were read to the couples from a nonacademic stance after the sexual desire part of the interview. Participants were subsequently interviewed about

how their relationships had transformed over time, with an additional focus on their connections with desire and differentiation of self.

Data for Fraenkel et al.'s (2015) qualitative study were analyzed through the method of a constructive grounded theory and coded accordingly. Fraenkel et al. found factors that contributed to sexual desire throughout the span of the committed relationship were (a) the ability to be comfortable with their partner's autonomy (or spending time apart), (b) breaks from routine followed by a sense of ease or maintaining low stress levels, (c) regularly sharing feelings or doing activities together, and (d) participating in eroticism (i.e., envisioning sexual activity and use of sex toys or games). On the contrary, factors that disturbed sexual desire in relationships were stress, conflict, children, monotony, and fatigue. Gender differences were not relevant to a lack of desire; however, women reported relational conflict and children to be factors contributing to desire disturbances.

Differentiation of Self and Relationship Satisfaction

As couples feel interconnected to their partners while preserving a sense of self, Kluwer et al. (2020) indicated such characteristics were a driving factor for enabling partners to maintain and feel secure in their relationships. This research hypothesized satisfying needs of autonomy and relatedness interfere with partners' ability to accommodate their partner (i.e., having the capacity to respond constructively as opposed to destructively to their partner's behaviors). Kluwer et al. asserted when couples are proficient in preventing reactive interactions that are destructive to the relationship, escalation of conflict is minimized and stated to be an important behavioral strategy that promotes and accommodates the relationship. Kluwer et al.'s research included three

studies. Two online surveys were conducted via social media and Dutch internet sites. Both groups were measured on satisfaction of needs in relationship (autonomy and relatedness), differentiation of self, and accommodation.

The third study conducted by Kluwer et al. (2020) encompassed a sample size of 220 participants. Participants read a specific situation pertaining to their assigned group and were given a writing task to explore their level of autonomy in their relationship. Level of autonomy was manipulated in this sample and participants were randomly assigned to the authentic or controlled condition. Participants were asked to describe a time they felt authentic in their relationship. The authentic group was given instructions that evoked positive feelings about their relationship and partner. On the contrary, the control condition evoked negative feelings about their relationship and partner. Both groups completed an 11-item autonomy scale.

Individuals in the authentic condition endorsed more autonomy than those in the control group (Kluwer et al., 2020). Due to the influence of potential confounding results and instruction to think either positively or negatively about their relationships, the sample was further questioned to evaluate how they felt about their partnership in that current moment, using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from very negative to very positive. As further indicated, the authentic group consisted of high autonomy and the control group consisted of low autonomy. Participants in both conditions were given the same measures assessing for satisfaction of needs in relationship, differentiation of self, and accommodation similar to the first two studies.

The findings of the three studies supported the hypothesis that couples who have a high degree of autonomy and a strong sense of wanting to connect and relate to their

partners correlated with being more accommodating in their relationships (Kluwer et al., 2020). Such accommodation is indicated to be a strong component in relationship well-being and stability in relationships.

Dell'Isola et al. (2019) examined components of differentiation of self and relationship outcomes. The study analyzed anxious attachment and relationship efficacy as a contributing factor between differentiation and relationship satisfaction. Participants were administered a survey to complete during Weeks 1, 7, and 14 of the study. At Week 1, participants were surveyed on their differentiation of self. During Week 7, the sample was assessed on their relationship efficacy and anxious attachment. The survey participants took in Week 14 measured conflict hostility and relationship satisfaction.

Dell'Isola et al. (2019) found relationship satisfaction and conflict hostility was not related to taking an I-position and nonemotional reactivity. The research indicated higher degrees of differentiation of self may be insufficient in explaining relationship success. However, the study supported anxious attachment contributes to the correlation between taking an I-position and perceived relationship efficacy, suggesting adults who are both anxiously attached and differentiated can simultaneously have positive relationship results. Additionally, participants with a greater capability in adopting an I-position and nonemotional reactivity were correlated with having a diminished degree of anxious attachment. Furthermore, differentiation of self was associated with less anxious attachment, with greater relationship efficacy and reduced conflict hostility.

Norona and Welsh (2016) conducted a study on young adults who were romantic and exclusively involved with their partners for 3 weeks minimum. The aim of the research was to examine differentiation of self as a mediator between rejection sensitivity

and relationship satisfaction. The findings supported the hypothesis of differentiation of self and its subcomponents as a mechanism for impacting relationship satisfaction.

Results indicated rejection sensitivity was indirectly associated with relationship satisfaction through a subcomponent of differentiation of self, indicative of emotional cutoff. Relationship satisfaction was reduced when partners distanced themselves emotionally and physically from experiences that may have posed a threat to being rejected and accepted by their partner. Rejection-sensitive individuals may withhold engaging in the relationship, especially with shared activities, sexual activity, and self-disclosure. Such individuals in this sample may have been more susceptible to increased rejection and decreased relationship satisfaction.

Mindfulness, differentiation of self, and relationship satisfaction have also been a focus in previous research. Khaddouma et al. (2015) acknowledged individuals who have the ability to ground their attention to the current moment may be better equipped at differentiating themselves during stressful or demanding instances in a romantic relationship. Such individuals may manage these encounters more intentionally with reduced reflexivity. Results highlighted trait-mindfulness was associated with relationship satisfaction indirectly through subcomponents that characterize differentiation of self, specifically “fusion with others” and the “I-position.” The essence and process of relational enmeshment and interpersonal autonomy illustrate avenues through which factors of trait mindfulness are positively associated with relationship satisfaction through domains of differentiation.

As most research has been conducted on heterosexual samples, authors Spencer and Brown (2007) examined subcomponents of differentiation of self (e.g., emotional

cutoff and fusion) in lesbian couples, as well as relationship satisfaction and internalized homophobia. The sample included 53 lesbian couples, of which, the majority were living together and had been together for an average of 5.5 years. The mean age was 35 years old; 61% had a university degree; 79% had full-time employment; and most of the sample was of English Australian decent. The sample was obtained through snowball sampling on social and professional networks.

Spencer and Brown (2007) concluded lesbian couples tended to have more satisfying relationships when they were more differentiated. In addition, several statistically significant correlations were found, such as when the sample reported higher levels of emotional cutoff, lesbian couples reported higher degrees of relationship satisfaction. The researchers highlighted the notion that good communication is not facilitated by emotionally cutting off one's partner. However, such function may support relationship satisfaction in the short term while it gives couples a sense of security as conflict is diminished in the moment. This maladaptive dynamic of disengaging with one's partner provides the illusion that there is no relational conflict and the relationship is perceived as satisfactory. However, women partners who reported an inclination to reacting in an emotionally cut off way toward their partners perceived the quality of their relationship as less than satisfactory. Aspects of this maladaptive function may be indicative of partners too entrenched in their independent lives to notice the detrimental communication pattern. Furthermore, Spencer and Brown did not find an association with levels of fusion in the reported degree of relationship satisfaction. Authors suggested fusion might be a symptom of distress in the relationship as opposed to a precipitating factor. Thus, results suggested lesbian couples may perceive their relationships as close

as opposed to fused or enmeshed, while clinicians may perceive their relationships as fused when compared to heterosexual norms.

Sexual Desire and Relationship Satisfaction

Research on women's sexual desire conducted by Sutherland et al. (2020) examined four subgroups of women who presented with low sexual desire. Within these groups, authors predicted sexual desire for women would fall into a (a) satisfied group (i.e., sexually and nonsexually satisfied in their romantic relationships); (b) sexually dissatisfied group (i.e., low sexual desire but not low relationship satisfaction); (c) globally distressed group (i.e., low sexual desire and low relationship satisfaction); and (d) the life stress group (i.e., indicative of average relationship satisfaction and low sexual desire attributable to heightened stressors). Thus, Sutherland et al. measured sexual and relational satisfaction, sexual communication, life stressors, and sexual desire. The sample included 508 women, over the age of 18, in a long-term relationship of at least 1 year. The study participants were predominantly White, in their current relationship for 11.3 years, with an average age of 37.55 years old.

Findings suggested sexual desire in women showcased qualitative differences within the subtypes (Sutherland et al., 2020). Sutherland et al. (2020) found support for two specific low desire groups, precisely the globally distressed group and the sexually dissatisfied group. The globally distressed group was low in relationship satisfaction and low sexual desire. The women in this group endorsed low desire and external blame toward their partners, which was a pattern that highlighted hopelessness and relational discord. As opposed to attributing one's sexual desire and problems toward internal factors, women who externally perceive their sexual desire may feel more helpless to

change sexual problems than those who are able to manage the issue on their own. Other findings regarding the sexually dissatisfied group reported low sexual desire and sexual communication concerns, but they were average in their relationship satisfaction. Results indicated women varied on qualitative differences when it came to sexual desire, and women who fell into lower sexual desire categories may have had lower relationship satisfaction evidenced by contextual factors in the relationship impacting the state of desire.

Leonhardt et al. (2020) conducted a study to explore relational and individual drivers of sexual passion. Researchers measured sexual passion, relationship factors, attachment security, childhood abuse, and personality. Important findings in this research highlighted individuals with higher sexual desire tended to have a secure attachment style, did not have a history of child abuse, and were low in impulsivity and shyness. Such factors were predictive of sexual passion, which encompassed harmonious sexual passion (e.g., ability for autonomous, balance, and controlled desire), and nonharmonious, maladaptive aspects of sexual passion (e.g., being obsessive, having under controlled passion, and an inhibited overcontrolled sexual passion). Furthermore, sexual desire toward one's partner was associated with higher degrees of harmonious sexual passion, increased obsessive sexual passion, and a decrease in inhibited sexual passion. The authors noted moderate increments of obsessive sexual passion were not indicative of harm in a committed relationship. Overall findings suggested sexual desire appears to be a contributing factor to healthy relationships encompassing adaptive forms of sexual passion.

Mark et al. (2020) examined reasons for not engaging in sexual activity to further the knowledge on sexual desire and sexual and relationship satisfaction. Participants in relationships were asked questions for 30 days about engaging or not engaging in sexual activity. As evidenced by the research findings, men and women endorsed not having time to engage in sexual activity, one was too fatigued, or one was not in the mood. Women were more apt to endorse self-based reasons for not engaging in sexual activity (e.g., “I wasn’t in the mood,” “I was too tired,” or “sex is painful”). Contrary to women, men were more likely to not engage in sexual activity due to partner reasons (e.g., “my partner was not in the mood” or “my partner was too tired”). Gender effects were present in the study, indicating women were more likely to not engage due to their own factors, and men were more likely to not engage due to partner factors.

Results highlighted further reasons for not engaging in sexual activity were a matter of logistics, ailments, menstruation, relational conflict, and stress (Mark et al., 2019). Furthermore, those with higher levels of sexual desire were less attuned to engage in sexual activity due to themselves or self-based reasons. In addition, men and women who did not engage in sexual activity and attributed it to self-based reasoning, projected lower degrees of sexual desire. However, when joint-based (e.g., reciprocal communication and understanding with their partner for deciding to engage in sexual activity) reasons for not engaging in activity with their partners arose, this predicted higher levels of sexual desire in the sample for both genders.

Mark et al. (2019) also found when men had higher relationship satisfaction, they tended to endorse personal-based (e.g., making a decision without partner’s understanding and collaboration) reasons for not engaging in activity. Further stated,

when men and women reported higher levels of relationship satisfaction, reasons for not participating in sex were joint-based reasons. This is indicative of viewing their partners positively and understanding behaviors attributable to the dyad, as opposed to partner or self when not engaging in sexual activity.

Across three different studies incorporating dyadic, daily experience, longitudinal, and experimental methods, researchers examined sexual desire and relationship satisfaction (e.g., Muise et al., 2019). They contributed to the literature on self-expansion theory to guide the investigation of their research. Self-expansion activities were described as endeavors that included elements of excitement, novelty, interest, and challenge. The highlight of Muise et al.'s (2019) research was when individuals participated in self-expanding activities, their feelings of sexual desire and sexual and relationship quality were intensified. Results indicated when partners participated in self-expanding efforts throughout their daily lives or when they were instructed, couples endorsed higher sexual desire. Couples reported having sex on days they pursued self-expanding activities that enhanced their desire as well. The increase in positive feelings associated with self-expansion promoted an increase in sexual desire and relationship satisfaction. Exciting and novel activities provided advantages for partners desiring one another outside of familiarity. Self-expanding activities ranged from physiological arousal (e.g., kickball, skateboarding) to activities low in arousal (e.g., deep conversation). Of note, the type of activity the couples pursued was not indicative of sexual desire and relationship satisfaction.

Not only did participating in self-expanding activities enhance relationship satisfaction, but it also impacted partner growth and development. These results were

stronger in long-term relationships, but significant for long- and short-term relationship durations. Muise et al. (2019) acknowledged couples should maintain self-expansion activities on a consistent basis to continue benefiting sexually and relationally.

In a study conducted in Portugal, Pereira et al. (2019) examined sexual and relationship satisfaction and the perception of sexual desire as problematic or not. The sample consisted of 346 heterosexual and gay men of the average age of 29.21 years. The authors investigated differences in solitary and dyadic sexual desire. The study sought to assess the perceived impact of sexual desire discrepancies on sexual and relational satisfaction. Important findings suggested gay men had significantly higher levels of sexual desire in solitary and partner-focused sexual experiences compared to heterosexual men. Gay men appeared to be more compelled to engage in sexual activity with their partner or by themselves. Furthermore, when heterosexual and gay men perceived their sexual desire discrepancies as problematic, it was associated with sexual and relational dissatisfaction. When discrepancies in desire were not perceived as problematic, sexual and relationship satisfaction were higher; this was revealed for both heterosexual and gay men. The fundamental impact of the study demonstrated how perception of sexuality concerns influences relationship happiness in a sexually diverse population.

Relationship factors, sexual desire, and sexual activity were examined in a study by Dewitte and Mayer (2018) using a daily diary methodology in the life of heterosexual couples. Participants included 66 couples who reported their level of relationship quality over the course of 21 days. Individuals reported each morning on sexual desire and sexual activity in which they had engaged. Participants had been in their relationships for at least 1 year. Important findings from this research indicated sexual desire relied on

how satisfied, close, and committed the women felt in their relationships with their partners during the day and previous day. The previous day also impacted the level of desire the women experienced in terms of relationship quality. Sexual activity increased for women when they felt more satisfied in their relationships the previous day. The researchers suggested sexual desire for women weighed on relational and situational contexts that promoted emotional intimacy as pathway for wanting to engage in sexual activity. On the contrary, men's sexual desire was not responsive in the way that women's sexual desire was reported. Men reported more physical reasons for engaging with their partners, such as being more susceptible to their internal and biological features of sex as opposed to situational and emotional reasons. The results also highlighted couples who were less satisfied in their relationships benefited from sexual activity, indicating sex as a way to restore relationship balance. Sexual activity in relationship was also dependent on women's perception on how satisfied she felt in the relationship.

In a sexually diverse sample, Mark et al. (2018) studied sexual desire, attachment style, and sexual and relationship satisfaction. There were a total of 955 participants, the majority identified as straight; however, gay men, lesbian, and bisexual individuals were also surveyed. Findings from the study indicated individuals with avoidant and anxious attachment styles predicted sexual and relationship satisfaction in a significantly negative direction. There was a limited correlation between attachment style and sexual desire; however, researchers highlighted participants with avoidant attachment styles reported lower sexual desire. Individuals with avoidant attachment were reported as more self-reliant, deflecting to intimacy or closeness, and possessing a refusing or restricting desire for their significant other. Those with avoidant attachment may depend on themselves for

sexual pleasure (e.g., seeking pornography, personal masturbation) as opposed to seeking their partner for sexual gratification. On the contrary, anxiously attached individuals reported higher desire for their partners as they tended to rely more on their partners, needed to be close to them, and viewed their partner more favorably; as a result, leading to higher amounts of desire.

Muise et al. (2017) conducted two studies to examine approach-motivated sex and avoidance-motivated sex. Approach-motivated sexual goals comprised of engaging in sex for the benefit of positive outcomes, such as physical pleasure for self and partner, as well as intimacy reasons. On the contrary, avoidance-motivated sexual goals comprised of engaging in sex to deflect negative relationship outcomes, such as disappointment, conflict, and sexual tension. In the first study, Muise et al. hypothesized individuals with approach-oriented sex goals would have higher sexual desire and relationship satisfaction.

In the second study, Muise et al. (2017) instructed participants to focus on approach-motivated sexual goals as opposed to avoidance-motivated sexual goals across two randomly assigned groups. Baseline sexual goals were also assessed for the second study. Researchers predicted participants' responses in the approach-motivated condition would show an increase in their goals from their baseline sexual goals that would influence their sexual desire and relationship satisfaction. The conclusion supported the hypotheses that those who reported being approach-motivated reported higher sexual desire and relationship satisfaction. Thus, in the second study, findings showcased it was possible to enhance approach goals from original baseline sex goals through instruction of what to focus on in the sample. This study highlighted the importance of helping

couples maintain or enhance sexual desire and relationship satisfaction through having or adopting approach-motivated goals. The significance of goals for couples engaging in sex were a critical variable when considering what contributes to sexual desire and relationship satisfaction.

Muise et al. (2013) examined motivation for couples to meet one another's sexual needs through a term coined *communal strength*. The essence of communal strength in long-term relationships was predicted to enhance sexual desire by increasing sexual motivation for partner-focused causes (i.e., sexually pleasing their significant other to promote intimacy). Thus, the communal approach to sexual desire provides benefits to a partner's needs without needs being reciprocated or expected by the other partner. The opposite of this concept is called *exchange relationships*, which indicates sexual rewards are given to the partner with the presumption needs will be met in return. Muise et al. (2013) conducted a 21-day study with a longitudinal follow-up in long-term relationships, examining communal strength in enhancing sexual desire. The researchers further predicted those high in communal strength would engage in sexual activity for partner focused goals, promoting daily sexual desire in partnerships. The sample included 44 heterosexual couples from ages 23–60 years. The couples completed a survey each night for 21 days assessing the aforementioned constructs on whether they engaged in sex with their partner or not. If the couple engaged in sex, they would further complete a survey surrounding sexual goals and desire. After 4 months, another short survey was administered as a follow-up.

Muise et al. (2013) found those who were eager to meet their partner's sexual needs encountered sexual advantages for the self. Individuals high in communal strength

enhanced daily sexual desire, which promoted one to pursue their romantic partner for sex in a partner-focused way. The participants who reported higher levels of communal strength at the beginning of the study maintained their levels of sexual desire at the 4-month follow-up. On the contrary, those low in communal strength had lower sexual desire, which also declined over the course of the study, a characteristic of longer-term partnerships. This study provided evidence that motivation to meet a romantic partner's sexual needs may be contingent for maintaining a sense of chemistry, spark, or aliveness in long-term partnerships.

In research conducted by Murray and Milhausen (2012), relationship satisfaction was controlled between relationship duration and sexual desire in a sample of 170 heterosexual men and women from 18–25 years of age. Participants were measured on demographics, sexual desire, and relationship satisfaction. For women, length of relationship explained the variance for sexual desire—as sexual desire decreased relationship duration increased. On the other end of the spectrum, sexual desire in men did not decrease and was not a significant predictor for their relationship duration. Results also highlighted women's sexual desire was not correlated with the quality of the relationship, but sexual satisfaction was the major contributor of sexual desire for the women sampled. Thus, men's sexual desire was correlated with sexual satisfaction but not relationship duration or similar factors associated with women sexual desire. Important notions in Murray and Milhausen's study indicated women sexual desire may decrease over the longevity of relationship, but for men it may be different.

In a study conducted by Ferreira et al. (2014), authors examined couples' satisfaction through understanding the role of differentiation of self by means of sexual

desire and intimacy. Participants included 438 individuals in committed heterosexual relationships. Ferreira et al. examined differentiation of self as a predictor of sexual desire, intimacy, and satisfaction in couples. Findings indicated sexual desire mediated the relationship between differentiation of self and couple satisfaction, as well as connection between differentiation of self and intimacy. Additionally, intimacy mediated the association between sexual desire and satisfaction in couples.

As such, researchers have highlighted sexual desire may be a motivator of behavioral domains of intimacy that affect couple satisfaction. Couple satisfaction and intimacy tend to be dyadic variables, as opposed to differentiation of self which leans toward an individual variable dynamic to interpersonal relationships. This suggests differentiation promotes individuals to maintain autonomy while in an invested relationship. As a result, differentiation is an essential component in couple satisfaction. Partners who are well-differentiated may be more protected against losing interest and more proficient in regulating personal emotions. For women, intimacy was the mediating variable between sexual desire and couple satisfaction and differentiation. On the contrary, sexual desire and intimacy was not a predictor of differentiation leading to couple satisfaction. Thus stated, sexual desire was not a predictor for couple satisfaction for men. However, intimacy and couple satisfaction were closely correlated in the study overall, whereas sexual desire was significantly related to differentiation of self. Ferreira et al. exclusively measured heterosexual relationships.

Study Rationale and Relevance to the Field

As indicated by the review of literature, the overabundance of research has focused almost exclusively on romantic heterosexual partnerships. Perceived gaps in the

research have minimally explored sexually diverse relationships, representative of individuals in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning community. There is minimal understanding and research on sexual desire, levels of differentiation, and relationship satisfaction in sexual minority couples and heterosexual couples. Thus, in addition to including a heteronormative sample, this research was inclusive to relationships that encompassed sexual diversity. To expand knowledge of factors related to committed relationships, the sample did not exclude participants based on sexual orientation.

This topic is relevant to the field of counseling psychology as psychologists in this specialty focus on culturally sensitive practices and improving lives of individuals and groups from a variety of diverse backgrounds. Valuing diversity brings awareness to the functioning of people's lives and acknowledges ways to improve or alleviate distress or maladjustment. This research was hypothesized to bring attention to individuals of a sexually diverse nature who have largely been neglected and underrepresented in the literature of psychology. This study aimed to examine how differentiation of self predicts relationship satisfaction moderated by sexual desire in an inclusive sample of married individuals.

Hypotheses

As established in the theoretical orientations and literature review, the following hypotheses were as indicated:

- 1) higher differentiation of self will positively predict higher relationship satisfaction;

- 2) higher sexual desire will positively predict higher relationship satisfaction;
and lower sexual desire will predict lower relationship satisfaction;
- 3) sexual desire will moderate the relationship between differentiation of self and relationship satisfaction, that is, higher sexual desire will strengthen the relationship between differentiation of self and relationship satisfaction; lower sexual desire will weaken the relationship between differentiation of self and relationship satisfaction.

Chapter 2

Method

This study used a quantitative research design that included surveys administered through Qualtrics, an experienced management software platform often used for data collection. The purpose of this study was to gather data on domains related to differentiation of self, relationship satisfaction, and sexual desire from individuals who are in married relationships. This study examined if differentiation of self would predict relationship satisfaction moderated by sexual desire. The data were interpreted using IBM SPSS Base 28 software.

Participants

The present research invited individuals to participate in a study about differentiation of self, relationship satisfaction, and sexual desire. Individuals were notified that participation in study would take approximately 30 minutes. Participants included adults over the age of 25, who were English speaking, and in a monogamous married relationships of at least 1 year duration. For the sake of this study, participants were excluded if they were not married and under the age of 24. The participants included in this study were 52% cisgender men, 47% cisgender women, and 1% transgender men. Individuals in the study indicated 51% had partners who identified as a cisgender man, 48% reported their partners gender to be a cisgender woman, <1% stated their partner to identify as a transgender man, and <1% endorsed their partner to identify as a transgender woman. Regarding sexual orientation, 65% identified as straight/heterosexual, 33% identified as bisexual, and 2% identified as lesbian/gay. The

median years of marriage duration was 10 ($SD = 173.87$). The mean age for this study was 38 ($SD = 11.74$).

The following study had an anticipated effect size of .15, a statistical power level of .95, alpha level of .05, one predictor in Set A (Differentiation of Self), and two predictors in Set B (Relationship Satisfaction and Sexual Desire). According to the power analysis, the minimal sample size was expected to be at least 107. After the data were collected, a hierarchical multiple regression was used to analyze, interpret, and compute for each hypothesis in the study.

Instruments

The Differentiation of Self Inventory (DSI; Skowron & Friedlander, 1998) is a 43-item instrument measuring a multidimensional construct of differentiation in adults over age 25. Individuals read the statements and carefully decided how true the statements were for them using a 6-point Likert scale. The measure included four subscales—Emotional Reactivity, I-Position, Emotional Cutoff, and Fusion with Others. The Emotional Reactivity subscale is comprised of 11 items that corresponds with the degree to which one reacts to environmental factors as evidenced by emotional flooding, lability, or hypersensitivity. The I-Position subscale is comprised of 11 items that reflect the degree to which the individuals showcase a sense of self and follow through with one's personal convictions if pressured. The Emotional Cutoff subscale is comprised of 12 items that demonstrates the degree to which one feels threatened by intimacy and vulnerability evidenced by fear of losing self, fear of over functioning, distancing, or denial in proximity to others. The Fusion with Others subscale is comprised of nine items that indicated excessive emotional involvement with others. To score the DSI, raw scores

are computed on all subscales. Higher scores on the DSI reflect higher differentiation and lower scores reflect lower differentiation. Internal consistency for the DSI ($\alpha = .88$) reflected a good, valid, and reliable measure. Each subscale within the DSI was also a valid measure for each construct (i.e., Emotional Reactivity $\alpha = .84$; I Position $\alpha = .83$; Emotional Cutoff $\alpha = .82$; and Fusion with Others $\alpha = .74$). Sample statements included, “Whenever there is a problem in my relationship, I’m anxious to get it settled right away,” and “If someone is upset with me, I can’t seem to let it go easily.” On a 6-point Likert-type scale, individuals chose an answer between “(1) *Not at all true for me*” and “(6) *Very true for me.*”

The Couples Satisfaction Index (CSI; Funk & Rogge, 2007) is a 32-item scale that measures relationship satisfaction. There is a global item that uses a 7-point scale, and 21 other items that use a variety of response choices using a 6-point Likert scale format. Convergent and construct validity on the CSI have demonstrated excellent internal consistency. Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for the full 32-items on the CSI yields .98. The CSI is a valid and reliable measure for relationship satisfaction. A sample statement on the CSI includes, “Please indicate the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.” On a 7-point scale, individuals chose an option from the following: (0) *Extremely unhappy*, (1) *Fairly unhappy*, (2) *A little unhappy*, (3) *Happy*, (4) *Very happy*, (5) *Extremely happy*, or (6) *Perfect*. Participants answered statements, such as, “I still feel a strong connection with my partner,” and “I sometimes wonder if there is someone else out there for me.” In which, participants had the option to rate themselves on a 6-point Likert scale: (0) *Not at all true*, (1) *A little true*, (2) *Somewhat true*, (3) *Mostly true*, (4) *Almost completely true*, or (5) *Completely true*.

The Sexual Desire Inventory (SDI; Spector et al., 1996) is a 14-item scale that measures partner-related and solitary-related sexual desire. The instrument uses an 8- and 9-point response rating scale. A factor analysis was performed on all items except item 14. Items 1–9 consist of the Dyadic Sexual Desire subscale, and Items 10–12 consist of the Solitary Sexual Desire subscale. Calculations for the Dyadic Sexual Desire subscale can be equated by summing items 1–8. Calculations for the Solitary Sexual Desire subscale can be equated by summing Items 10–12. The correlation between Dyadic Sexual Desire and Solitary Sexual Desire was .35. In addition to strength of validity, Item 9 was not calculated in the Dyadic Sexual Desire subscale as it was not quantifying sexual desire. Item 9 measured sexual desire in comparison to others. Item 13 was not scored in the Solitary Sexual Desire subscale for the same reason as item 9. There was excellent internal consistency for the Dyadic Sexual Desire subscale ($\alpha = .86$) and Solitary Sexual Desire subscale ($\alpha = .96$). As evidenced by the statistics, the SDI had strong reliability. Sample question items on the SDI included, “During the last month, how often have you had sexual thoughts involving a partner?” and “During the last month, how often would you have liked to behave sexually by yourself?” When answering questions of this style, participants responded by choosing one of the eight options. Answer options included: (0) *Not at all*, (1) *Once a month*, (2) *Once every two weeks*, (3) *Once a week*, (4) *Twice a week*, (5) *3 to 4 times a week*, (6) *Once a day*, and (7) *More than once a day*. Additional questions included, “When you have sexual thoughts, how strong is your desire to engage in sexual behavior with a partner” or “How strong is your desire to engage in sexual behavior by yourself?” For these questions,

participants responded by rating how strong their desire was on a scale between 0 (*indicating no desire*) and 8 (*indicating strong desire*).

Procedure

Participants were recruited via Amazon Mechanical Turk to ensure a diverse participant pool. Initially, individuals first read the outline of the research design and gave their consent for participation to complete the survey. Next, demographic questions asked the participants their age, ethnicity, gender identity (i.e., cisgender male, cisgender female, transgender male, transgender female, prefer not to answer, or a write-in “other” option), sexual orientation (i.e., straight/heterosexual, lesbian/gay, bisexual, or a write-in “other” option), and relationship duration. Participants were also asked “What is the gender of your spouse or partner?” (i.e., cisgender male, cisgender female, transgender male, transgender female, prefer not to answer, or a write in “other” option). Individuals were surveyed on DSI, CSI, and SDI. The participants included married adults over the age of 25 who spoke English. Validity questions were embedded in the survey to ensure quality response patterns in the data (i.e., If you are reading this closely, please select “not at all true for me”). Each participant was compensated \$1.00 for their time and completion of the survey.

Chapter 3

Results

This study examined the role of sexual desire on differentiation of self and relationship satisfaction. Descriptive statistics for the variables are presented in Table 1 and Table 2. Data in Table 3 and Table 4 indicate the bivariate correlations between all variables.

Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations for Sexual Orientation

Variables	<i>n</i>	Sexual desire		Differentiation of self		Relationship satisfaction	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Straight	257	89.18	1.16	153.51	.37	18.66	10.52
Lesbian/gay	6	87.64	1.10	157.81	.35	20.09	10.73
Bisexual	132	93.38	1.04	144.91	.32	19.51	10.50

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations for the Survey Responses

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Differentiation of self	3.53	.34
Emotionally reactive	3.31	.70
I-Position	3.78	.69
Fusion	3.60	.68
Emotional cutoff	3.33	.80
Relationship satisfaction	25.80	3.10
Sexual desire	6.53	1.10
Dyadic	6.72	1.06
Solitary	6.00	1.07

Note. Total $M = 151.79$ for differentiation of self. Total $M = 25.80$ for relationship satisfaction. Total $M = 91.42$ for sexual desire. Higher scores on the scales of Differentiation of Self, Emotionally Reactive, I-Position, Fusion, and Emotional Cutoff,

reflect higher differentiation; the total score range from 43–258. Total scores for relationship satisfaction range from 0–161, and higher scores reflect greater satisfaction. Total scores range from 0–101 for Sexual Desire, and higher scores reflect higher desire.

Table 3

Bivariate Correlations Between All Variables

Variables	Differentiation of self	Dyadic sexual desire	Solitary sexual desire	Sexual desire
Differentiation of self	--	-.38*	-.43*	-.45*
Emotionally reactive	.90*	-.45*	-.45*	-.50*
I-Position	-.74*	.44*	.43*	.48*
Fusion	.90*	-.33*	-.40*	-.39*
Emotionally cutoff	.90*	-.41*	-.42*	-.46*
Relationship satisfaction	-.25*	.22*	.14*	.22*
Sexual desire	-.45*	.95*	.79*	--
Dyadic	-.38*	--	.57*	.95*
Solitary	-.43*	.57*	--	.70*

Note. * $p < .05$.

Table 4

Bivariate Correlations Between Differentiation of Self and Sexual Desire With the Variables

Variables	Differentiation of self*Sexual desire
Differentiation of self	.18*
Emotionally reactive	.04
I-Position	.02
Fusion	.17
Emotionally cutoff	.11*
Relationship satisfaction	.09*
Sexual desire	.80*
Dyadic	.79*
Solitary	.57*

Note. * $p < .05$.

Hypothesis 1

It was hypothesized higher levels of differentiation of self would positively predict relationship satisfaction. A Pearson correlation coefficient was computed to assess the relationship between differentiation of self and relationship satisfaction. As the level of differentiation increased, relationship satisfaction decreased producing a small correlation between the variables. Although there was a small association, results were statistically significant producing a negative correlation with relationship satisfaction, $R^2 = .09$, $F(4, 267) = 6.40$, $p = < .001$.

Hypothesis 2

It was hypothesized higher sexual desire would positively predict higher relationship satisfaction and that lower sexual desire would predict lower relationship satisfaction. The overall regression analysis was not significant, $R^2 = .01$, $F(2, 265) = 1.41$, $p = .247$. Sexual desire did not appear to be correlated with relationship satisfaction.

Hypothesis 3

It was hypothesized higher sexual desire would moderate the relationship between differentiation of self and relationship satisfaction, and lower sexual desire would weaken the relationship between differentiation of self and relationship satisfaction. The interaction of sexual desire between differentiation and relationship satisfaction negatively strengthened the association between such variables. Although the effect was minimal, sexual desire as a moderating variable showcased a statistically significant outcome, $R^2 = .05$, $F(1, 264) = 15.98$, $p = < .001$. Findings suggested individuals with higher differentiation had higher sexual desire creating a negative outcome for relationship satisfaction.

Chapter 4

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate three separate hypotheses: (a) the prediction of higher differentiation of self would lead to higher relationship satisfaction, (b) the prediction that higher sexual desire would correlate with higher relationship satisfaction, and (c) to identify if sexual desire moderated the relationship between differentiation of self and relationship satisfaction. The data from the first hypothesis were not supported despite significant findings that were inconsistent with established research in the field. The second hypothesis was not supported to reflect a significant result and that sexual desire did not predict relationship satisfaction. Moreover, the third hypothesis was also not supported despite the significant interaction of sexual desire between differentiation of self and relationship satisfaction producing a negative finding.

This study aimed to understand the impact of differentiation of self, sexual desire, and relationship satisfaction. Higher differentiation of self was hypothesized to positively predict relationship satisfaction, which was not supported in this research. It was expected the higher one's differentiation was, the more satisfied one would be in their relationship, indicating a positive correlation. Although the correlation was significant, a negative association between variables was found. Findings in this sample indicated the more differentiated an individual was in their relationship, the less likely they were to be satisfied. This is contrary to previous research on differentiation of self and relationship satisfaction for both heterosexual and same-sex relationships (Gubbins et al., 2010; Lampis et al., 2019; Sommantico et al., 2021). It is possible current findings differed from previous research suggesting higher levels of differentiation could signify

relationship discomfort because stronger communication could make for unpleasant or anxiety-provoking relationship dynamics in the short term. However, researchers have argued individuals who have lower differentiation find it difficult to cope with relationship anxieties and function less efficiently in stressful situations, suffering more in physiological and mental ways (Peleg & Zoabi, 2014). Navigating territories and interventions to help couples lessen their discomfort in communication and relational needs is a possible avenue for deeper exploration.

The results of this study concluded an inverse relationship; such evidence suggests higher differentiation of self may signify a threat to the partnership and overall relationship satisfaction over the course of one's marriage. Such individuals with higher differentiation may have partners with a mismatch in differentiation which could provide an explanation for lower relationship satisfaction. Bowen (1978) acknowledged partners can shift in their levels of differentiation overtime, which could vary due to an increase in knowledge and experience. Additionally, Dell'Isola et al. (2019) acknowledged higher differentiation was associated with being less anxiously attached and, therefore, insufficient at determining relationship outcomes. Thus, those who were differentiated with anxious attachment were also found to be capable of having positive relationship results. Perhaps individuals were less anxious in the current study's sample; however, less anxious attachment may not indicate a better relationship satisfaction.

As individuals in the current study's sample were married, perhaps higher differentiation of self might have concluded better adjustment in their partnerships but not necessarily greater relationship satisfaction. The median duration of marriage in this sample was 10 years; in a study by Bühler et al. (2021), findings suggested relationship

satisfaction decreased as time progressed in the marriage. More specifically, Bühler et al. found couples reached the lowest point in relationship satisfaction at 10 years of marriage. Relationship satisfaction slowly increased until 20 years, and then subsequently started to decrease again. Individuals with higher differentiation of self in this study might be more adaptive to managing relationship difficulties as they rise, thus not signifying greater relationship satisfaction but a higher threshold of working through marital discomfort. Other variables in this study were likely to have impacted the research to create a negative correlation not accounted for, such as the presence of children and their ages.

The second hypothesis was not significantly supported in that higher sexual desire did not positively predict higher relationship satisfaction. Thus, 1% of the variance explained the correlation between high sexual desire and relationship satisfaction; however, the effect size was too low to adequately indicate a strong regression analysis. Given indications from the first hypothesis and prior research on marital duration and relationship satisfaction, this sample was likely to have had other factors contribute to their sexual desire and relationship satisfaction with their spouse. That is, 99% of the variance was unexplained in this hypothesis.

Although most of the sample identified as heterosexual, 33% identified as bisexual, which might denote potential nuances on how couples with differing sexualities perceive desire and satisfaction in their marriages. Research on premarital heterosexual couples has indicated high levels of satisfaction, both sexually and relationally (Sprecher, 2002). Perhaps sexual desire in committed relationships as opposed to married relationships would have provided a different result in this research. However, the

insignificant relationship between sexual desire and relationship satisfaction in this sample could imply a lack of security, commitment, and stability to desire their partners sexually and be fulfilled in their partnerships. Prior studies have found associations between sexual desire discrepancies and reduced relationship satisfaction (Willoughby et al., 2014). In addition, further research has suggested greater sexual desire and frequency of sex is associated with relationship satisfaction and positive couple interactions and well-being as well (Brezsnyak & Whisman, 2004; Liu, 2003). Although the current study's sample reflected those with high sexual desire, the study did not account for frequency of sexual behavior. Thus, desiring one's spouse is simply not adequate to explain relational satisfaction. Sexual desire is likely to exist whether one is in a relationship or not. Such a finding in this study could convey sexual desire was simply not influential to relationship satisfaction overall as other aspects in marriage might have been (e.g., gender, age, communication, intimacy, frequency of sexual behavior, children, finances, busy schedules, daily stress, harmful behaviors).

The third hypothesis of this study concluded a significantly negative finding when sexual desire moderated the relationship between differentiation of self and relationship satisfaction. When differentiation of self was used as a predictor variable, sexual desire strengthened the outcome for lower relationship satisfaction such that the interaction of sexual desire moderated the association between differentiation and relationship satisfaction. This finding is inconsistent with previous research on the topic of heterosexual relationships (Ferreira et al., 2014; Price et al., 2020). Research on the topic has indicated individuals with higher degrees of differentiation have a greater ability at adapting, coping, maintaining a strong sense of self, and creating boundaries that permit

intimacy, thus reflecting positive characteristics for maintaining a satisfying relationship. Ferreira et al. (2016) suggested differentiation of self may be associated with sexual desire and could potentially be viewed as a protective factor in committed partnerships. The benefits of sexual desire are maintained when there is a perception of unpredictability in relationship and the individual is able to maintain a strong sense of self; thus, having lower desire has been associated with different life stage factors among couples in long term relationships (Sims & Meana, 2010). Additional issues with desire have also been linked to overall relationship issues (Breznyak & Whisman, 2004).

Given past research and current findings, it is a surprise higher differentiation of self led to higher sexual desire that created a decrease in relationship satisfaction, contrary to what was predicted. Moreover, sexual experiences can impact individuals and couples to feel vulnerable and anxious (Barnes et al., 2007), potentially impacting overall relationship satisfaction. Sexual desire is more of an emotional and cognitive internal process that does not imply action of sexual behavior attached to it.

Differentiation of self captures the degree in which one can remain calm and practice emotional control during stressful situations. The current study's sample is likely to desire their partners highly, although having high differentiation and high desire does not indicate spouses will seek sexual experiences with their loved one. Thus, both constructs are deeply emotional and cognitively driven. Such differentiation in a partner would likely increase emotional intimacy that leads to desiring sexual activity, but not necessarily acting on desire to have physical intimacy, and is therefore, likely to interfere with satisfaction in the long run. Having a higher differentiation of self might indicate

better control of managing desire independently as sexual desire is a subjective experience that ebbs and flows.

A spouse's higher differentiation of self could enable one to have more openness and emotional understanding of their partner. This, in turn, might lead the other spouse to feeling emotionally connected, secure, loved, and receptive to desiring their partner. Schnarch (2009) emphasized differentiation of self preserves sexual desire, allowing couples to deepen their desire past the honeymoon stage of a relationship into secure attachment creating greater satisfaction. The outcome in this current research indicated higher differentiation of self and higher sexual desire does not necessarily mean a spouse is satisfied in their relationship. Additionally, sexual desire conceptualized through Perel's (2007) perspective has illustrated couples in fused relationships have a suppression in desire that does not permit high levels of intimacy or autonomy. Enmeshment in partnership can weaken desire when individuality is low. Having a sense of self or individuality in relation to one's partner enables sexual desire to become a resilient factor. In the current study, this finding could imply desiring one's spouse is a protective factor for relationship duration or longevity, but not satisfaction. Differentiation of self is a construct that encompasses an individual's level of awareness of emotional and cognitive understanding within themselves. When this intrapsychic dynamic is applied to a romantic relationship, higher differentiation adds to the emotional and cognitive nuances that make a partnership thrive as it is deeply in tune and mindful of their partners needs as well. Despite the lack of anticipated findings and contradiction in prior research, sexual desire does not imply satisfaction even if one is differentiated.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

In addition to the hypotheses previously mentioned, this research sought to encompass deeper understanding on marital relationships inclusive to all marriage pairings as referenced in this sample's demographics. However, the results did not incorporate a sample size sufficient to understand married couples who identified as lesbian or gay. Given the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to extend marriage rights to same-sex couples in 2015, it is possible there are perceptions in the LGBTQ+ community that link marriage to heteronormative belief systems that result in heterosexist norms impacting one's inclination to marry (Jowett & Peel, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2015). In addition, such recent legislation reduces the pool of same sex couples eligible for this study. Future research with higher percentages of same sex couples may produce a diversity of findings.

This research attempted to provide an increased understanding regarding the role of sexual desire, which has largely been understudied and vaguely approached in the field of psychology. The strength of this study focused on married relationships and satisfying deeper connections between couples. This focus increased the ability to influence how clinicians treat and approach conditions associated with relationship distress or comfort. This is important because healthy relationships tend to be a protective factor against many psychological, physical, and medical disparities. Furthermore, the final sample met the power analysis needed to produce significant results, despite the lack of anticipated outcomes. Thus, this study created additional questions that could serve as guidelines for additional research endeavors.

There were several limitations to this research study. Ethnicity was not examined in the final analysis as the item that measured this demographic variable was corrupt. Such inclusion of ethnicity data may have produced a unique perspective on understanding effects. The nature of this study was based on self-reported data, which can produce results with validity concerns as participants can exaggerate or minimize their responses. Moreover, this study surveyed one spouse and did not consider the other spouse. Regarding the measures used, scales focused on relationship satisfaction as opposed to marital satisfaction which could potentially have created a different outcome.

Due to limited research and literature on sexual desire, this construct is still not fully understood. Most research on sexual desire has been informed by theory or clinical observations. Theories on sexual desire predominantly focus on the behavioral and physiological changes in biological response patterns as indicated by researchers Masters and Johnson (1966). Although Masters and Johnson's theory acted as a springboard for understanding sexual desire and creating the language for this topic, a significant piece was still lacking in the conceptualization of the model. Kaplan's (1977) model of sexual response added to the approach of Masters and Johnson's theory, in which, Kaplan was able to separate sexual desire and sexual arousal as two different elements. Much of the existing literature has operated within these models to understand sexual relationships and has incorporated an outdated perspective on dynamics that connect people. Janssen and Bancroft's dual control model of sexual response did not provide an updated perspective to understanding the construct of sexual desire until 2007. Although this model gave an emotional component to the aforementioned theories, more research to refine the construct is needed, as are agreeable operational definitions in the field. The

current understanding of sexual desire is still a developing component in sexuality research, which was a limitation of this study.

As with all quantitative research methods, correlational outcomes cannot determine cause-and-effect relationships but can help researchers understand and predict the value of another variable on complex levels. Should future research be conducted, the researcher would benefit by exploring this topic from a qualitative design. As sexual desire is a difficult construct to define and assess through survey methods, qualitative research might indicate a deeper awareness of the experiences between married heterosexual and same-sex or other LGBTQ+ couplings on this topic. Providing a perspective on the nuances of married heterosexual and queer relationships could help clinicians better understand their clients and unique issues that may present in couples counseling. Additionally, providing longitudinal frameworks might exhibit changes in relational patterns at different stages over the duration of a couple's lifetime together, as well as capture changes in sexual desire and potential fluctuations in differentiation of self.

Application for Counseling Psychologists

This study focused on the impact of sexual desire on differentiation of self and relationship satisfaction in individuals who identified as over the age of 25 and married. Counseling psychology has engaged in the study of understanding adaptive behavior and emotional patterning. The field of counseling psychology takes a particularly progressive perspective to understand diversity and social justice aspects that impact individual functioning. This research approached sexual desire from the lens of counseling psychology as it endeavored to assess the complex dynamics of inclusive marital

relationships. Incorporating individuals from a multitude of backgrounds is a culturally sensitive practice for improving the lives of a broader range of individuals.

Given the nature of this research and societal practices and belief systems, marital status may have been a strong determining factor for producing a heteronormative sample. Considerations for counseling psychologists and researchers should explore the detrimental role of heteronormative labels on LGBTQ+ individuals and their relationships to understand differentiation and desire expressions. Data from other ethnicities and mixed raced couples should also be explored and incorporated to understand nuances of differentiation, desire, and relationship satisfaction altogether. Encompassing a plethora of belief systems and understanding traditional and nontraditional relationship patterns would incorporate a culturally sound practice that would yield more inclusive underpinnings for potential sexual desire patterns, relationship satisfaction, and degrees of differentiation. Recommendations for clinical interventions that target an increase in relationship satisfaction may focus on helping couples increase their level of differentiation of self and understanding their unique desire expression to address sexual concerns that impact relational happiness.

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