

Giving in the bedroom: The costs and benefits of responding to a partner's sexual needs in daily life

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Abstract

A common reason why people in ongoing romantic relationships report engaging in sex with their partner—in addition to pursuing their own pleasure—is to meet their partner's sexual needs. While meeting a partner's needs with responsiveness and care is crucial in romantic relationships, it is important, especially in the domain of sexuality, that people do not neglect their own needs when meeting the needs of their partner. In a 21-day daily experience study of both members of 122 romantic couples recruited from the community, we tested whether being responsive to a partner's sexual needs (i.e., high sexual communal strength) and focusing on a partner's needs while neglecting one's own needs (i.e., high unmitigated sexual communion) were associated with both partners' daily sexual and relationship satisfaction. We also tested attention to positive partner-focused and negative self-focused cues during the sexual experience as novel mechanisms of these effects. The results generally showed that on days when people (or their romantic partner) reported higher sexual communal strength, they reported greater attention to positive partner-focused sexual cues and, in turn, both partners experienced greater daily sexual and relationship satisfaction. In contrast, on days when people reported higher unmitigated sexual communion, they reported greater attention to negative self-focused sexual cues and, in turn, experienced lower relationship and sexual satisfaction, although these effects did not extend to their romantic partner. Implications of the results for promoting higher quality sexual experiences and relationships are discussed.

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In his popular sex advice column, Dan Savage heralds the importance of putting in work and effort to meet a partner's sexual needs in romantic relationships, something he calls being "GGG" ("good in bed, giving based on a partner's sexual interests, and game for anything, within reason"). Since the time when he coined this term, mounting empirical evidence has shown that people who are communally motivated to meet their partner's sexual needs as they arise (i.e., high in sexual communal strength) experience and have partners who report greater sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and commitment (see reviews by Impett, Muise, & Rosen, 2015; Muise & Impett, 2016).

Yet, a crucial part of Dan Savage's advice—and a part that has been all too often ignored in popular media—is that the willingness to meet a partner's sexual needs should not come at the cost of people neglecting their own sexual needs. Indeed, when people try to meet their partner's needs to the exclusion of their own needs, relationships can become distressed and imbalanced (see review by Fritz & Helgeson, 1998). The primary aim of the current paper was to investigate the relationship and sexual consequences of the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs that is self-neglecting in nature and not mitigated by a person's sense of their own needs (i.e., high *unmitigated sexual communion*). While we expected to replicate existing research showing that being motivated to meet a partner's sexual needs (i.e., high sexual communal strength) will be associated with greater relationship and sexual satisfaction for both partners in romantic relationships, we expected that when the focus on meeting a partner's needs comes at the cost of people neglecting their own needs, both partners will report lower relationship and sexual satisfaction. We also tested attention to positive partner-focused sexual cues and negative self-focused sexual cues as novel mechanisms of these effects.

Sexual communal motivation

The theory of communal motivation suggests that in communal relationships—such as those we have with family members, romantic partners, and close friends—people provide care non-contingently, that is, they give care to others without expectations for direct reciprocation (Clark & Mills, 2012). There are also important individual differences in the strength of people's motivation to respond to a specific partner's needs, referred to as communal strength (Mills, Clark, Ford, & Johnson, 2004). People high in communal strength give to their partner insofar as the personal costs incurred in meeting their partner's needs are reasonable, and they trust that their partner will be responsive to their own needs when they arise (Mills et al., 2004). A recent meta-analysis documented a robust link between communal strength for a romantic partner and increased personal and interpersonal well-being for both partners in romantic relationships (Le, Impett, Lemay, Muise, & Tskhay, 2018).

Theories of communal motivation have also been applied to the domain of sexuality to understand individual differences in the motivation to meet a partner's *sexual needs* in

a communal manner (see reviews by Impett et al., 2015; Muise & Impett, 2016). Sexual communal strength represents the extent to which people are motivated to respond to their partner's sexual needs (Muise, Impett, Kogan, & Desmarais, 2013). Qualitative research has shown that people high in sexual communal strength are more likely to engage in sex with their partner when they are not entirely in the mood, display open-mindedness about their partner's preferences, learn about their partner's preferences and share their own, and ensure that partners are mutually responsive to one another's sexual needs (Muise & Impett, 2015).

A growing body of empirical evidence suggests that people high in sexual communal strength have partners who report that their partner is indeed responsive to their needs and, in turn, report feeling more satisfied and committed to the relationship (Muise & Impett, 2015). In another study, participants who indicated that they had made more frequent sexual changes (e.g., engaging in sex more frequently than they might desire) and who felt positive about making these changes for their partner were more satisfied and had romantic partners who were also more satisfied with their relationship (Burke & Young, 2012). These results suggest that the willingness to make sexual changes and satisfaction with these changes promote increased relationship satisfaction in romantic couples.

The motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs is not only associated with benefits for the partner but, somewhat paradoxically, has been linked to increased benefits for the self. In a sample of long-term couples, sexual communal strength was positively associated with a person's own sexual desire and satisfaction (Muise & Impett, 2015; Muise et al., 2013). Further, whereas people lower in sexual communal strength experienced declines in sexual desire over a period of 4 months, those people who were more highly motivated to meet their partner's sexual needs began the study with slightly higher desire and were able to maintain these levels of sexual desire over time (Muise et al., 2013).

Unmitigated sexual communion

The findings about the benefits of being communally motivated to meet a partner's needs are not meant to suggest that partners should always be willing to meet one another's sexual needs. People who are communally motivated are not only motivated to meet the needs of their partner but also hope and expect that their partner will be similarly motivated to meet their *own* needs as these needs arise. Although the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs can be beneficial for both partners, the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs while neglecting one's own needs is unlikely to be beneficial for either partner in the relationship. Indeed, research on unmitigated communion (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998)—the tendency to give to others in a manner that is devoid of agency and concern for one's own needs—has shown that individuals high in unmitigated communion experience more negative and less positive affect in situations of interpersonal conflict (Nagurney, 2007). In essence, people higher in unmitigated communion take the value of interpersonal connectedness to an unhealthy extreme, prioritizing the needs of others while neglecting their own psychological and physical well-being (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998). Whereas giving communally with care for a partner's welfare is beneficial for the self and the relationship, if a person's care for others is not mitigated by their own

agency (i.e., they neglect their own needs and solely focus on the needs of their partner), they report compromised personal and interpersonal well-being (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998), including greater distress, depression, and anxiety; less optimism; and more disappointment in life (Danoff-Burg, Revenson, Trudeau, & Paget, 2004; Fritz, 2000; Fritz & Helgeson, 1998; Helgeson, 2003; Helgeson & Fritz, 1999)

Recently, theories of unmitigated communion have been extended to the domain of sexuality, and work in this area has shown that whereas people who are high in sexual communal strength and their partners report higher sexual and relationship satisfaction, people high in *unmitigated sexual communion* and their partners do not reap these sexual or relationship benefits and, in some cases, report more negative experiences. More specifically, in a sample of couples in which the woman was diagnosed with provoked vestibulodynia (PVD), a chronic sexual pain condition, on days when women reported higher unmitigated sexual communion, they experienced greater sexual pain and both partners reported lower satisfaction, more depressive symptoms, and poorer sexual functioning (Muise, Bergeron, Impett, Delisle, & Rosen, 2018; Muise, Bergeron, Impett, & Rosen, 2017). These findings are in contrast to the positive effects of sexual communal strength found in this sample; more specifically, on days when women and their partners reported higher sexual communal strength, both partners reported greater sexual and relationship satisfaction and better sexual functioning (Muise et al., 2017). These findings suggest that, in clinical samples, even though people high in unmitigated sexual communion report being solely focused on meeting their partner's sexual needs, their partners are not benefiting from their hypervigilance to their sexual needs and may, in fact, be even less satisfied with their sex lives and relationships than those who received more balanced sexual responsiveness.

Based on existing research and theory (Muise & Impett, 2015; Muise et al., 2013), we expected to replicate previous findings that when people are focused on meeting and responding to their partner's needs during sex, both partners would report increased daily relationship and sexual satisfaction. In contrast, based on existing research (Muise et al., 2017, 2018) as well as theory on unmitigated communion (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998), we expected that when people are focused on meeting their partner's sexual needs to the point of neglecting their own needs, both partners would experience lower relationship and sexual satisfaction. Much of the existing research on unmitigated communion has been studied in couples in which at least one partner is struggling with a health-related or clinical issue (e.g., cardiac patients; Fritz, 2000) including the two studies of women diagnosed with PVD (Muise et al., 2017, 2018). It is possible that couples facing such challenging issues may be more susceptible to experiencing poorer outcomes when one or both partners neglect their own needs, leaving it an open question as to whether unmitigated sexual communion would also predict poorer outcomes in a sample of healthier, community couples.

The mediating role of attention to sexual cues

A key theoretical and empirical advance of the current work is to test mechanisms of the links between sexual communal motivation and sexual and relationship satisfaction: the types of cues that people attend to during daily sexual experiences with their partner

(Birnbaum, Reis, Mikulincer, Gillath, & Orpaz, 2006). Broader literature on the construct of communion suggests that communal people have a positive view of others (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998), perceive others as generally available and responsive to their needs (Helgeson & Fritz, 1998), and have positive perceptions of the availability of social support (Helgeson & Fritz, 2000). In fact, previous research has shown that people higher in sexual communal strength tend to engage in sex to pursue positive outcomes in their relationship (Muisse et al., 2013) and may be more fully immersed in the positive aspects of a sexual experience. Based on this work, we expected that one key reason why people will experience greater sexual and relationship satisfaction on days when they are communally motivated to respond to their partner's sexual needs is because they will attend more to partner-focused positive cues during sex, such as feelings of closeness and feeling desired by their partner. In addition, research on sexual communal strength has shown that one of the reasons why the partners of people high in sexual communal strength report higher relationship and sexual satisfaction is because they perceive that their partner is responsive to their needs during sex (Muisse & Impett, 2015). Accordingly, we also expected that people would also pay closer attention to positive partner-focused sexual cues when their partner is focused on meeting their needs and would, in turn, report increased relationship and sexual satisfaction.

While increased attention to positive partner-focused cues during sex might be a key reason why people are more satisfied when they are focused on meeting their partner's sexual needs, increased attention to negative self-focused sexual cues might help to explain why people feel less satisfied if they are so focused on meeting their partner's sexual needs that they neglect their own needs. A key feature of unmitigated communion is low self-esteem or regard for the self (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998), leading people to feel unworthy of other people's time or attention. Unmitigated individuals' fear of negative evaluations from other people (Helgeson, Swanson, Ra, Randall, & Zhao, 2015) and attention to others for self-evaluation (Fritz & Helgeson, 1998) might create feelings of anxiety that prevent them from connecting with their partner during sexual interactions and, consequently, shift their attention to more negative aspects of the sexual experience. In fact, for women coping with a sexual dysfunction, being higher in unmitigated sexual communal is associated with feeling more distressed during sex (Muisse et al., 2018). This hypothesis is also consistent with research showing that the intense self-focus of anxiously attached individuals during sex that stems from their feelings of insecurity can detract from their sexual experiences in relationships (Birnbaum et al., 2006). As such, we expected that when people are motivated to respond to their partner's sexual needs to the exclusion of their own needs, they will attend to more negative self-focused sexual cues such as feelings of distraction, detachment and boredom, and, in turn, feel less satisfied with the sexual experience and with their relationship. We did not have clear predictions about a possible link between the partner's unmitigated sexual communion and people's attention to negative self-focused cues, so we tested this link in an exploratory manner.

Overview of the current study

In a 21-day daily experience study of both members of romantic couples, we tested the associations between daily fluctuations in sexual communal motivation and both

partners' relationship and sexual satisfaction, as well as mediation by sexual cues. The current study builds upon and extends current research in three key ways. First, this study provides the first test of the links between two types of sexual communal motivation and relationship and sexual satisfaction in a sample of community couples. It is important to build on the previous research conducted with samples of couples in which at least one partner is struggling with a clinical issue or health condition (e.g., Fritz, 2000; Muise et al., 2017, 2018) because the costs of providing unmitigated communal care might have been particularly pronounced in these samples and may not extend to a healthier community sample. Second, while most research has conceptualized communal motivation variables as relatively stable individual differences (Day, Muise, Joel, & Impett, 2015; Muise & Impett, 2015; Muise et al., 2013), more recent research has shown that there is variability in both sexual communal strength and unmitigated sexual communion (Muise et al., 2018; Muise et al., 2017). This means that people can be more or less motivated to meet their partner's sexual needs (and to neglect their own needs) at different times; therefore, in the current research, we investigate how within-person daily fluctuations in sexual communal motivation track changes in the daily sexual and relationship satisfaction of both members of the couple. Third, since very little work has investigated the reasons why sexual communal motivation is associated with relationship and sexual satisfaction, a novel extension of the current research is to test attention to positive partner-focused and negative self-focused sexual cues during the sexual experience as possible mechanisms of the predicted effects.

Method

Participants and procedure

We recruited 122 couples through advertisements on the websites Reddit and Kijiji (posted in five major Canadian cities) as well as through advertisements posted in various public locations (e.g., libraries, community centers, coffee shops) in a major Canadian city. In terms of sample size, our goal was to recruit at least 100 couples following recommendations by Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006). We aimed to recruit additional couples to account for attrition or missing data and surpassed our goal by recruiting 122 couples.

Couples were eligible to participate if they were in an exclusive, monogamous relationship, had been together for at least 2 years, were currently living together, and if both partners agreed to participate. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 67 years ($M = 31.53$, $SD = 9.46$) and had been in their current relationship from 2 to 48 years ($M = 8.24$, $SD = 7.10$). Most participants were married (56.2%), 21.6% were engaged, and 22.2% were dating. The majority of participants identified as heterosexual (86%), with 7% identifying as gay/lesbian, 5% identifying as bisexual, and 2% as "other." Approximately one quarter (22.8%) of participants had children who were living at home, and, of those with children, participants had one or two children on average ($M = 1.54$, $SD = 0.64$). The majority of participants identified as White/European (78.3%), followed by Latin American (6.8%), East Asian (4.3%), South Asian (2.6%), Black/African (2.1%), and 6.0% were bi- or multi-ethnic/racial or self-identified as "other."

Participants were prescreened for eligibility via e-mail and telephone. After agreeing to participate, each partner was e-mailed a unique link to begin the background survey (55 min). Beginning on the following day, each partner was e-mailed a brief survey (10–15 min) for the next 21 consecutive days. Participants were instructed to complete the survey before bed, although they had access to the survey between 5 p.m. and 9 a.m. the next morning. Each partner was paid up to \$55 CAD for participating; payment was prorated depending on the number of daily surveys completed. Participants completed a total of 4,773 entries, for an average of 19.56 (out of 21) entries per person.

Daily measures

Participants completed measures of relationship satisfaction, positive affect, negative affect, and sexual desire each day. On days when they reported engaging in sex with their partner, they reported on their sexual communal strength, unmitigated sexual communion, sexual satisfaction, and attention to positive and negative sexual cues. We used outcome measures with only a few items or a single item in the diary study to increase efficiency and minimize participant attrition (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003). All items were rated on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all* to 7 = *extremely*). For all daily variables measured with more than a single item, we present omega (ω) values, calculated in Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2008–2017), to provide an assessment of within-person reliability of change (Lane & Shrout, 2010).

Daily relationship satisfaction was assessed with 1 item, “How satisfied were you with your relationship?” ($M = 6.13$, $SD = 1.17$; Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000). *Positive affect* was measured with 3 items (“happy, pleased, joyful,” “interested, attentive,” and “amused, having fun”; $M = 5.24$, $SD = 1.21$, $\omega = .77$) and *negative affect* was measured with three items (“anxious, nervous,” “sad, depressed, down,” and “angry, irritated, hostile”; $M = 2.25$, $SD = 1.36$, $\omega = .90$), used in previous daily experience research (Impett et al., 2010). *Daily sexual desire* was measured with 1 item (“Today, I felt a great deal of sexual desire for my partner”; $M = 4.38$, $SD = 1.75$), used in previous research (Muisse, Stanton, Kim, & Impett, 2016).

Each day, participants were asked “Did you and your partner have sex today?” (yes/no). Participants reported engaging in sex with their partner on a total of 830 days (17%), where the number of days in which they had sex ranged from 0 to 17 days over the course of the 21-day study ($M = 3.47$, $SD = 3.00$). Each day they reported engaging in sex, they reported on their *sexual communal strength* with 3 items from a previously validated measure (Muisse et al., 2013) that were adapted to focus on sexual activity that occurred that day, including “During sex, I was focused on meeting my partner’s needs,” “During sex, I did things to meet my partners’ needs without expecting him or her to directly reciprocate,” and “Meeting my partners’ needs was a high priority for me during sex” ($M = 5.33$, $SD = 1.36$, $\omega = .81$). *Unmitigated sexual communion* was assessed using 3 items from a validated measure of unmitigated communion (Helgeson, 1993) to focus on a sexual encounter that occurred that day, including “During sex, I was only focused on meeting my partner’s needs,” “During sex, I put my partner’s needs ahead of my own needs,” and “During sex, it was impossible for me to satisfy my own needs if they conflicted with my partner’s needs ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 1.47$, $\omega = .74$). Both of these

measures of daily sexual communal motivation were used in previous daily experience research with romantic couples (Muisse et al., 2017, 2018).

Positive partner-focused sexual cues were measured with 3 items by Birnbaum, Reis, Mikulincer, Gillath, and Orpaz (2006), including “During sex, my partner was responsive to my needs,” “During sex, I felt connected to my partner,” and “During sex, my partner made me feel desired” ($M = 6.30$, $SD = .89$, $\omega = .72$). *Negative self-focused sexual cues* were measured with 3 items from Birnbaum et al. (2006), including “During sex, bothersome thoughts disturbed my concentration,” “During sex, I felt bored and apathetic,” and “During sex, I felt detached,” ($M = 1.51$, $SD = .97$, $\omega = .75$). *Sexual satisfaction* was measured with the Global Measure of Sexual Satisfaction adapted from the study by Lawrence and Byers (1998) to assess the extent to which participants felt that their daily sexual experience with their partner was bad/good, pleasant/unpleasant, negative/positive, unsatisfying/satisfying, and worthless/valuable ($M = 6.43$, $SD = 0.90$, $\omega = .91$).

Results

Data analytic strategy

We analyzed the data with multilevel modeling using the lme4 package (Bates, Maechler, Bolker, & Walker, 2015) in R (R Core Team, 2016), and the analyses were guided by the Actor–Partner Interdependence Model (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). We tested the associations between a person’s daily sexual communal motivation (i.e., sexual communal strength and unmitigated sexual communion) and their own sexual and relationship satisfaction (i.e., actor effects) and the associations between a person’s daily sexual communal motivation and their partner’s sexual and relationship satisfaction (i.e., partner effects). We tested separate models for each outcome. All models included both partners’ ratings of sexual communal strength and unmitigated sexual communion entered simultaneously as predictors. We entered both sexual communal motivation measures together in all models because they were correlated ($r = .35$, $p < .001$) and, as shown in Table 1, were both associated at a bivariate level with some of the daily outcomes, and one of our primary goals was to isolate the potential “unhealthy responsiveness” component of unmitigated sexual communion when examining effects on daily relationship and sexual satisfaction.

We tested two-level cross models with random intercepts, in which persons are nested within dyads, and person and days are crossed to account for the fact that both partners completed the daily surveys on the same days (Kenny et al., 2006). To avoid confounding within- and between-person effects, we partitioned all of the daily predictors into their within- and between-variance components, which were person-mean centered and aggregated, respectively (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, & Congdon, 2004). As such, these analyses account for between-person differences in sexual communal motivation and unmitigated sexual communion and assess whether day-to-day changes from a participant’s own mean on the sexual communal motivation variables are associated with corresponding changes in sexual and relationship satisfaction. Given that both sexual communal motivation variables and positive and negative sexual cues were only

Table 1. Within-person correlations among all daily variables.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Sexual communal strength	-.05	.35***	.13**	.13***	.09	-.09	.13**	-.13***	.34***
2. Sexual unmitigated communion	-.18***	-.09	-.10	.05	-.15*	.07 [†]	.09*	-.05	.03
3. Sexual satisfaction	.08*	-.04	.15**	.35***	.55***	-.40***	.35***	-.21***	.60***
4. Relationship satisfaction	.01	.02	.22***	.23***	.43***	-.28***	.38***	-.23***	.30***
5. Positive partner-focused sexual cues	.25***	.08	.18**	.23***	.20***	-.33***	.36***	-.13*	.53***
6. Negative self-focused sexual cues	-.05	-.03	-.08*	-.05	-.10	-.01	-.18***	.18***	-.36***
7. Positive affect	.01	-.01	.13**	.22***	.18***	-.09*	.25***	-.46***	.33***
8. Negative affect	-.01	-.03	-.18***	-.20***	-.19***	.06	-.19***	.18***	-.21***
9. Sexual desire	.13***	.04	.18***	.16***	.22***	-.10*	.16***	-.14***	.49***

Note. Coefficients represent within-person correlations in the diary study calculated using Mplus; correlations above the diagonal are between each of the actor variables, and correlations along and below the diagonal are between the actor and partner variables.
[†] $p < .05$; * $p < .01$; ** $p < .001$.

assessed on days when sexual activity occurred, the analyses only included sexual activity days (728 total days). The coefficients reported are unstandardized betas (b) and are interpreted as the change in the outcome for every one-unit increase in the predictor; these act as an indication of the effect size. Within-person correlations among all study variables, calculated in Mplus (Muthén & Muthén, 2008–2017), are reported in Table 1.

In our tests of mediation, we tested a 1-1-1 mediation model in which all of the variables were at the daily level (but these analyses still controlled for aggregates of the daily variables to allow us to isolate the within-person effects). We used the Monte Carlo Method for Assessing Mediation (MCMAM; Selig & Preacher, 2008) with 20,000 resamples and 95% confidence intervals (CIs). A significant indirect effect was present if the CI did not contain zero.

Daily associations between sexual communal motivation and sexual and relationship satisfaction

Beginning with actor effects, as predicted and reported in Table 2, on days when people reported higher sexual communal strength than they typically did across the 21-day study, they reported increased relationship and sexual satisfaction. In contrast, on days when people were higher in unmitigated sexual communion, they reported significantly lower sexual satisfaction, but not relationship satisfaction. There were no significant associations between a partner's daily sexual communal strength or unmitigated sexual communion and people's own relationship or sexual satisfaction. In other words, when people were motivated to meet their partner's sexual needs, they reported higher sexual and relationship satisfaction, whereas when people were overly focused on meeting their partners' sexual needs to the exclusion of their own needs, they reported lower sexual, but not relationship satisfaction, but there were no effects of either type of sexual communal motivation on the partner's daily relationship or sexual satisfaction.

The mediating role of attention to sexual cues

We next tested attention to positive partner-focused sexual cues as a mediator of the effects of sexual communal motivation on sexual and relationship satisfaction as well as negative self-focused sexual cues as a mediator of the effects of unmitigated sexual communion. As predicted and shown in Table 2, on days when people reported higher sexual communal strength, they reported greater attention to positive partner-focused sexual cues and, in turn, reported greater satisfaction with the sexual experience (indirect effect: 95% CI [.02, .08]) and with the relationship (indirect effect: 95% CI = [.01, .05]). In contrast, on days when people reported higher unmitigated sexual communion, they reported greater attention to negative self-focused sexual cues and, in turn, reported lower sexual satisfaction (indirect effect: 95% CI [−.04, −.0006]); however, the indirect effect of unmitigated sexual communion on relationship satisfaction via attention to negative self-focused cues was not significant (indirect effect: 95% CI [−.01, .002]).

While we did not find significant total effects of sexual communal strength or unmitigated sexual communion on the partner's daily relationship or sexual satisfaction, we nonetheless tested whether there would be significant indirect effects through

Table 2. Daily associations between actor and partner sexual communal motivation variables and daily relationship satisfaction, sexual satisfaction, and positive partner-focused and negative self-focused sexual cues.

	Relationship satisfaction		Sexual satisfaction		Positive partner-focused sexual cues		Negative self-focused sexual cues	
	b(SE)	t	b(SE)	t	b(SE)	t	b(SE)	t
Actor sexual communal strength	.10 (.03)	3.72***	.11 (.03)	4.45***	.11 (.03)	4.33***	-.10 (.03)	-3.04**
Actor unmitigated sexual communion	-.05 (.03)	-1.60	-.07 (.03)	-2.44*	-.08 (.03)	-3.08**	.08 (.04)	2.15*
Partner sexual communal strength	-.03 (.03)	-1.07	.04 (.03)	1.69	.11 (.03)	4.33***	-.05 (.03)	-1.45
Partner unmitigated sexual communion	.04 (.03)	1.50	-.02 (.03)	-0.86	<.01 (.03)	0.11	<.01 (.04)	0.02

Note. b Values are unstandardized coefficients. Degrees of freedom ranged from 519.69 to 557.90.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

attention to sexual cues. These results showed that on days when partners were higher in sexual communal strength, actors reported greater attention to partner-focused positive sexual cues, and, in turn, they reported greater sexual satisfaction (indirect effect: 95% CI = [.02, .08]) and relationship satisfaction (indirect effect: 95% CI = [.01, .08]). Partner unmitigated sexual communion was not significantly associated with actors' attention to negative self-focused cues, and therefore there were no significant indirect effects via negative self-focused sexual cues.

Overall, on days when people were higher in sexual communal strength (or their partner was higher in sexual communal strength), both partners reported greater attention to positive partner-focused cues during sex such as feelings of connection and perceived partner responsiveness and, in turn, both partners reported feeling more satisfied with the sexual experience and with their relationship. In contrast, on days when people reported higher unmitigated sexual communion, they reported greater attention to negative self-focused sexual cues such as feelings of distraction and boredom, which in turn detracted from their satisfaction with the sexual experience and with their relationship. Although these effects of sexual unmitigated communion did not extend to the partner, the partner nonetheless did not reap the same benefits as those who had partners who provided more balanced sexual responsiveness.

Ruling out alternative explanations and providing evidence for generalizability of the findings

We conducted additional analyses to rule out possible alternative explanations and provide evidence for the generalizability of our findings. First, although our data are correlational, our theoretical model suggests that people's motivation to meet their partner's sexual needs shapes how they feel about their sexual experiences and their relationship. However, is it also possible that people's perceptions of their sexual interactions and of their relationship—perhaps influenced by general mood—are biasing their interpretation of how motivated they were to meet their partner's sexual needs. As such, we sought to show that sexual communal motivation was associated with daily relationship and sexual outcomes above and beyond the influence of more general positive or negative affect experienced that day. Indeed, additional analyses revealed that on days when people were higher in sexual communal strength, they reported increased positive affect, $b = .10$, $SE = .04$, $t(551.70) = 2.48$, $p = .01$, and decreased negative affect, $b = -.09$, $SE = .04$, $t(531.50) = -2.57$, $p = .01$, whereas neither the link between sexual unmitigated communion and positive affect, $b = .05$, $SE = .04$, $t(544.10) = 1.31$, $p = .19$, nor the link between sexual unmitigated communion and negative affect was significant, $b = -0.01$, $SE = .04$, $t(541.70) = -.26$, $p = .79$. Therefore, to control for possible differences in daily affective experiences, we reran all of the analyses controlling for both positive and negative affect and all of the previously reported effects, including all main effects and mediation models, remained significant.

Previous research has also demonstrated links between sexual communal strength and increased sexual desire (Muise et al., 2013) as well as between unmitigated sexual communion and lower sexual function (of which one aspect is sexual desire; Muise et al., 2017). As such, we thought it was possible that when people were responding to their

partner's needs in an unmitigated or self-neglecting way, they may have had lower sexual desire than when they are more generally responding to their partner's sexual needs, and these differences in sexual desire might account for the differences in the effects for the two types of sexual communal motivation. Indeed, additional analyses revealed that whereas actor sexual communal strength, $b = .15$, $SE = .04$, $t(549.40) = 4.137$, $p < .001$, and partner sexual communal strength, $b = .11$, $SE = .04$, $t(557.30) = 3.03$, $p < .01$, were both associated with increased daily sexual desire, both actor unmitigated sexual communion, $b = .04$, $SE = .04$, $t(556.30) = 0.87$, $p = .38$, and partner unmitigated sexual communion, $b = .01$, $SE = .04$, $t(556.00) = 0.35$, $p = .73$, were not. Given their differential links with sexual desire, we sought to provide evidence that both sexual communal motivation variables would predict daily sexual and relationship satisfaction above and beyond any influence of daily sexual desire. As such, we reran all of the daily analyses, and again, all of main effects and mediation models remained significant. These results suggest that the benefits of sexual communal strength and the costs of unmitigated sexual communion occur above and beyond the influence of sexual desire.

Finally, we also tested whether our effects were generalizable across gender, relationship length, and the presence of children in the home. Beginning with gender, men and women did not significantly differ in their daily sexual communal strength, $M_{\text{men}} = 5.44$, $M_{\text{women}} = 5.35$, $t(193.68) = -0.57$, $p = .57$, nor in their daily unmitigated sexual communion, $M_{\text{men}} = 3.75$, $M_{\text{women}} = 3.40$, $t(194.64) = -1.92$, $p = .06$. Further, gender did not significantly moderate any of the effects. In addition, relationship length was not significantly correlated with either daily sexual communal strength, $r(205) = -.09$, $p = .20$, or daily unmitigated sexual communion, $r(205) = -.03$, $p = .70$, and, did not significantly moderate any of the effects. These findings regarding gender and relationship duration replicate previous research (Day & Impett, 2015; Muise & Impett, 2015; Muise et al., 2013) and provide evidence for the generalizability of our findings.

We did, however, find that the effect of unmitigated sexual communion on both relationship, $b = .10$, $SE = .04$, $t(530.70) = 2.23$, $p < .05$, and sexual satisfaction, $b = .12$, $SE = .04$, $t(523.30) = 2.88$, $p < .01$, was moderated by whether or not couples had children in the home. More specifically, we found that for people who did not have any children living in the home (77.2% of the sample), on days when people were higher in unmitigated sexual communion, they reported lower relationship, $b = -.07$, $SE = .03$, $t(442.90) = -2.16$, $p < .05$, and sexual satisfaction, $b = -.10$, $SE = .03$, $t(432.00) = -3.17$, $p < .01$. However, for people who had one or more children living at home (22.8% of the sample), on days when people were higher in unmitigated sexual communion, there were no significant associations with sexual, $b = .14$, $SE = .07$, $t(92.14) = 1.94$, $p = .06$, or relationship satisfaction, $b = .13$, $SE = .08$, $t(91.7) = 1.69$, $p = .10$, and, in fact, the associations were positive.

Discussion

The most common reasons why people in ongoing romantic relationships report engaging in sex with their partner—in addition to pursuing their own pleasure—are to please their partner and to meet their partner's sexual needs (Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005;

Muise, Impett, & Desmarais, 2013). Indeed, we know from relationship science that displaying responsiveness to a partner's needs (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004) and incurring costs to meet those needs are crucial ingredients for relationship satisfaction and success (Righetti & Impett, 2017), including being attentive to and trying to meet a partner's sexual needs (Muise & Impett, 2015). Yet, research and theory suggest that it is important that this motivation not be taken so far that people neglect their own needs in the process (Le et al., 2018). In an ecologically valid 21-day study of both members of romantic couples, we demonstrated the costs and benefits of two specific forms of sexual communal motivation: being motivated to meet a partner's sexual needs (i.e., sexual communal strength) and being hypervigilant to a partner's sexual needs while neglecting one's own needs (i.e., unmitigated sexual communion) for both members of couples.

Our results replicated previous research documenting that the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs is associated with satisfaction for both members of romantic couples (Day & Impett, 2015; Muise & Impett, 2015; Muise et al., 2013). We extended this work by moving beyond conceptualizations of sexual communal strength as an individual difference variable to consider, instead, how daily fluctuations in the strength of people's motivation to meet their partner's sexual needs track changes in people's satisfaction with their sex lives and with their relationships (see also Muise et al., 2017, 2018, for a similar approach with a clinical sample). More specifically, we found that on days when people were more motivated to respond to their partner's sexual needs, they experienced greater relationship and sexual satisfaction. Further extending existing research, we demonstrated that attention to positive partner-focused cues during the sexual experience was a novel mechanism of these effects. Specifically, when individuals (or their romantic partner) reported higher sexual communal strength, they attended more to positive partner-focused cues such as feelings of connection and desire from their partner, and, in turn, both partners experienced greater relationship and sexual satisfaction. Thus, when people were focused on meeting the needs of others, this allowed both partners to place greater attention on the positive aspects of the sexual experience, ultimately contributing to more satisfying sexual experiences and relationships.

Our study also showed that when the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs was taken so far that people neglected their own needs, they reported attending more to negative self-focused cues during the sexual experience, such as feelings of distraction and boredom. In turn, feeling relatively detached during the sexual experience detracted from their feelings of satisfaction with the sexual experience (but not from the relationship as a whole). That is, people higher in unmitigated sexual communion focused more on the negative aspects of sex and, in turn, reported less enjoyment of their daily sexual experiences. People higher in unmitigated communion tend to have low self-worth and are overly focused on their partner's needs in order to feel valuable (Helgeson & Fritz, 2000). Therefore, when people are overly focused on trying to meet their partner's sexual needs to the exclusion of their own needs, they may have an insecure sense of self that is contingent on meeting their partner's sexual needs. Further, their feelings of distraction and detachment during the sexual experience may ultimately create a disembodied experience that detracts from their sexual enjoyment. Although the effects of sexual unmitigated communion did not extend to the romantic partner, it is

important to point out that the partner did not reap the same benefits as those whose partner was motivated to meet their needs but did not neglect their own needs in the process. Taken together, these results suggest that both partners experience the greatest relationship and sexual satisfaction when they are motivated to respond to each other's sexual needs but do not neglect their own needs in the process, further suggesting that couples who are able to strike the right balance between meeting each other's needs reap the greatest relationship and sexual rewards (Impett et al., 2015).

Interestingly, while these effects of sexual communal motivation on daily relationship and sexual satisfaction did not differ for men versus women or people in longer versus shorter relationships, we did find that the presence of children in the home mattered. More specifically, whereas people who did not have children living in the home experienced lower relationship and sexual satisfaction on days when they were higher in unmitigated sexual communion, people with children in the home did not experience lower relationship and sexual satisfaction, and if anything, the associations were positive. It is possible that when children are in the home and opportunities for sexual interactions may be more constrained, momentary lapses in people's own consideration for their own sexual needs might not be harmful (and potentially even beneficial) if they create opportunities for intimacy. In previous research, spending more time being affectionate with a partner after sex was more strongly associated with sexual and relationship satisfaction for parents compared to non-parents (Muise, Giang, & Impett, 2014), suggesting that devoting time to sexual connection might be especially important for couples who are parents. Future research that includes greater numbers of couples with children is needed to further examine this possibility.

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

The current study had several strengths. The use of daily experience methods with both members of romantic couples allowed us to capture both partners' experiences close in time to when they occurred, minimizing retrospective biases in self-reports. Existing research with clinical samples has shown that both sexual communal strength and unmitigated sexual communion fluctuate day-to-day (Muise et al., 2018; Muise et al., 2017) making it important to investigate the role of both of these sexual communal motivation factors in promoting or hindering sexual and relationship satisfaction in a daily context. The fact that we observed shifts in the strength of people's motivation to meet their partner's sexual needs as well as the extent to which they ignored their own sexual needs when doing so highlights the potential for future interventions, guided by this work, to try to produce shifts in sexual communal motivation to the ultimate benefit of relationships.

The study had several limitations that give rise to interesting directions for future research. Although we surveyed both members of the couple about their sexual experiences and feelings of sexual and relationship satisfaction each day over the course of the month, this research was correlational and causal conclusions cannot be drawn. It is possible that the associations are bidirectional, whereby partners who are currently more satisfied with their sex lives and their relationship become more motivated to meet their partner's needs. The possibility that being dissatisfied causes people to become

hypervigilant to their partner's sexual needs seems less likely; however, given that dissatisfied people are probably not likely to care about their partner's needs, much less prioritize them over their own needs. Following couples over a longer period of time could provide further insights into the direction of the associations, as well as the factors that might promote higher sexual communal strength and buffer against unmitigated sexual communion.

As the current study was centrally focused on demonstrating the costs and benefits of two types of motivations to meet a partner's sexual needs in daily life, we did not address the factors that promote sexual communal strength or unmitigated sexual communion in the first place. Research on communal motivation more generally suggests that self-disclosure is an important aspect of communal relationships (Clark & Mills, 2012). As such, one way to promote sexual communal strength and minimize unmitigated sexual communion in an ongoing relationship may be for partners to communicate about their sexual preferences. Open sexual communication about one's sexual likes and dislikes may give people information about what they can do to meet their partner's sexual needs (Byers & Demmons, 1999) as well as give the partner information about people's own personal needs, preferences, and boundaries. As such, it will be interesting for future research to determine the role of sexual communication in shaping both partners' willingness to meet each other's needs as well as to attend to their own needs. Determining whether it is possible to enhance people's communal motivation has important implications for improving couples' sexual relationships and for establishing novel targets of intervention in sex and couples therapy (Brotto, Bitzer, Laan, Leiblum, & Luria, 2010; Rosen, Rancourt, Bergeron, & Corsini-Munt, 2014).

Another limitation of the current work is that we did not assess people's sexual motivations, so we do not know how the motivation to meet a partner's sexual needs—in either a balanced and more unmitigated manner—is linked with the particular types of goals that people pursue when engaging in sex with their partner. Existing research has documented that sexual communal motivation is positively associated with approach partner-focused motivations for engaging in sex such as pleasing the partner and promoting intimacy in the relationship (Day et al., 2015; Muise et al., 2013). While we did not have a measure of goals in this diary study, it is certainly possible that when people engage in sex to meet their partner's needs to the exclusion of their own needs, they are more likely to pursue avoidance sexual goals such as avoiding conflict or a partner's anger (Impett et al., 2005), which could in turn explain the negative sexual and relationship consequences of unmitigated sexual communion documented in this study.

Conclusion


One thing that distinguishes relationship advice columns—such as “Savage Love”—from academic research on relationships is that the advice columnists often provide prescriptive advice to people who are seeking to address important problems in their relationships and to make their partnerships stronger and more satisfying. Not all of this advice is good, and even less of it is based on empirical evidence. Dan Savage's advice to be good, giving, and game in the bedroom is now backed by a growing body of empirical research on the relationship and sexual rewards that couples reap from showing that they

are attuned to and motivated to meet their partner's sexual needs, even when those needs are different than their own (Impett et al., 2015; Muise & Impett, 2015). While we do not yet know what it is that people can do to increase their motivation to meet their partner's sexual needs, the fact that sexual communal motivation changes from day-to-day suggests that there is some room for people to follow Dan Savage's advice to become more communal, yet again as he has suggested, it is also crucial that people do not neglect their own sexual needs in the process.

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