The Detriments of Unmet Sexual Ideals and Buffering Effect of Sexual Responsiveness

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Abstract

Most couples view sexual satisfaction as crucial for the maintenance of romantic relationships, yet our understanding of a person's *sexual ideals* (i.e., the traits and attributes a person desires in a sexual partner and the characteristics of a sexual experience a person finds to be ideal) and what might buffer against lower satisfaction associated with unmet sexual ideals, is limited. One factor that may help couples manage unmet sexual ideals is *sexual communal strength*—the extent to which a person is motivated to meet their partner's sexual needs. Across six studies including cross-sectional, dyadic, longitudinal, and experimental methods ($N = 2,429$), we draw on the Ideal Standards Model and theories of communal motivation to examine whether unmet sexual ideals are associated with lower sexual satisfaction and relationship quality and test whether higher sexual communal strength buffered these effects. Results suggest that when individuals perceive their partner to fall short in meeting their sexual ideals, they feel less sexually satisfied and report poorer relationship quality. However, having a partner who was high in sexual communal strength buffered these effects. Whereas people with partners who were low in sexual communal strength typically reported poorer sexual satisfaction and relationship quality when their sexual ideals were unmet, these negative associations were attenuated among people with partners who were high in sexual communal strength. Our results provide novel evidence of the deleterious effects of unmet sexual ideals for relationships and suggest that sexual communal strength can help buffer these detriments among partners.

Keywords: romantic relationships; sexual ideals; relationship quality; sexual satisfaction; sexual communal strength

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Sexuality is an important aspect of romantic relationships that differentiates romantic partnerships from other types of close relationships (Schwartz & Young, 2009). Indeed, sexuality holds such a privileged role in romantic relationships that partners are typically forbidden from seeking sexual interactions with other people outside the relationship (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004). For better or worse, romantic partners usually have to rely heavily on each other to fulfill their sexual needs. Unfortunately, sexual incompatibilities (i.e., differences between partners in their sexual preferences and desires) are common and can be distressing in long-term relationships (Miller, Yorgason, Sandberg, & White, 2003). Different sexual interests between partners are a key reason why couples seek therapy (Beck, 1995; Hawton, Catalan, & Fagg, 1991; Henry & Miller, 2004; Miller et al., 2003; Rosen, 2000) and are among the most difficult types of concerns to successfully resolve (Sanford, 2003). Despite the prevalence of sexual incompatibilities in relationships, our understanding of a person's *sexual ideals* (i.e., the traits and attributes a person desires in a sexual partner and the characteristics of the sexual experience they hold to be ideal) and what might buffer against dissatisfaction associated with unmet sexual ideals remains limited. In the current research, we draw on theories of ideal standards in relationships (e.g., Fletcher, Simpson, & Thomas, 2000; Fletcher, Simpson, Thomas, & Giles, 1999; Simpson, Fletcher, & Campbell, 2001) and sexual communal motivation (e.g., Muise & Impett, 2016) to examine whether perceptions of unmet sexual ideals in a relationship are associated with lower sexual satisfaction and relationship quality, and if so, whether *sexual communal strength*—the motivation to be responsive to a partner's sexual needs—can buffer against the lower satisfaction predicted to be associated with unmet sexual ideals.

Ideal Standards for a Romantic Relationship

Ideal standards for a romantic relationship reflect one's hopes and expectations for a romantic partner (Fletcher et al., 1999). A substantial amount of theoretical and empirical work has focused on what individuals are looking for in potential romantic partners (for a review see Campbell & Stanton, 2014 or Eastwick, Luchies, Finkel, & Hunt, 2014; also see Buss, 1999; Eastwick, Finkel, & Simpson, 2019; Fletcher, Overall, & Campbell, 2019; Fletcher, Simpson, Campbell, & Overall, 2013; Simpson, Fletcher, & Campbell, 2001). This work has been informed by the Ideal Standards Model (Fletcher et al., 1999; Simpson et al., 2001), which posits that people possess images of their ideal romantic partner across a range of attributes (e.g., interpersonal warmth, physical appeal, status and resources), and these ideal preferences are used to evaluate both potential mates and actual partners in existing relationships. According to the Ideal Standards Model, relationships should develop and be maintained more smoothly and successfully when individuals enter relationships with a partner who more closely matches their ideal preferences (Campbell, Overall, Rubin, & Lackenbauer, 2013; Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001; Csajbók & Berkics, 2017; Fletcher et al., 2000; Overall, Fletcher, & Simpson, 2006), with accumulating research providing support for this claim (Campbell, Chin, & Stanton, 2016; Fletcher et al., 2019; Gerlach, Arslan, Schultze, Reinhard, & Penke, 2019).

The predictions put forth in the Ideal Standards Model are consistent with other prominent theories in social psychology. Self-discrepancy theory posits that when an individual's experiences or attributes do not match their ideal state, this self-discrepancy produces vulnerabilities and creates distress and dissatisfaction for the individual (Higgins, 1987; Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1985). Similarly, interdependence theory suggests that as relationships develop, interactions between partners involve rewards (e.g., sexual pleasure, relationship

satisfaction, security) and costs (e.g., increased responsibility, distress or anxiety, despair, fear; Rusbult & Buunk, 1993) that are associated with decisions about the relationship (Cate, Lloyd, & Long, 1988; Kelley & Thibault, 1978; Rusbult, 1980; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959) and sexual behavior (Byers, Demmons, & Lawrance, 1998; Sprecher, 1998). When people's beliefs about the costs of the relationship exceed their perception of the rewards of that relationship, they are less likely to be satisfied with their relationship, and their relationship is less likely to persist over time (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). Although interdependence theory does not explicitly mention unmet ideals, it is likely that individuals' evaluations of their partner meeting their ideals would have similar consequences as when the rewards and costs in the relationship do not meet a person's expectations, with greater discrepancies resulting in lower satisfaction and commitment.

Researchers have examined discrepancies between a person's ideal standards and their perceptions in various domains. Past work has shown that discrepancies between a person's perceptions of them self, their life, their housing conditions, and so forth, compared to their ideal for that domain is associated with domain-specific dissatisfaction or unhappiness (Higgins et al., 1985; Michalos, 1986; Ruvolo & Veroff, 1997). Research in the area of close relationships has examined discrepancies between ideals and perceptions of the current partner or relationship and suggests that the extent to which a current partner meets an individual's ideals is associated with relationship satisfaction (e.g., Buyukan-Tetik, Campbell, Finkenauer, Karremans, & Kappen, 2017; Campbell et al., 2001; Fletcher et al., 1999; Fletcher et al., 2000; Kelley & Burgoon, 1991; Meltzer, McNulty, Jackson, & Karney, 2014) and the likelihood of the relationship enduring (see Eastwick et al., 2014). In the current work, we were interested in a specific facet of ideal standards, namely, individuals' perceptions of their partner meeting their sexual ideals. This

approach is consistent with the key hypothesis of the Ideal Standards Model (Fletcher et al., 1999; Simpson et al., 2001) which suggests that romantic outcomes (e.g., partner selection, partner evaluation, breakup) should be associated with the degree to which a person perceives their partner to meet their ideals.

Ideal Standards for a Sexual Relationship

Although psychologists have devoted ample attention to understanding whether ideal standards for a romantic partner are associated with relationship and sexual quality, little attention has been paid to the ideal standards people hold for their *sexual* relationships. People likely possess expectations of the kinds of outcomes they will receive in a sexual relationship and the traits they desire in a sexual partner. In the current research, we refer to these expectations and preferences as *sexual ideals*. While under-researched, sexual ideals have been described in research concerning more general relationship ideals. For example, in early work by Fletcher and colleagues (1999), people indicated that having a sexy partner who was a good lover was ideal, in addition to other ideals, such as warmth and resources, but the specific contribution of met or unmet sexual ideals to sexual and relationship quality have not been explored.

To date, research has assessed how relationship ideals shape outcomes related to seeking out, attracting, and retaining romantic partners, but there is currently a paucity of measures designed to assess individuals' trait variation in sexual ideals. There is also a lack of information about what one's sexual ideals would encompass and whether unmet ideals shape sexual and relationship outcomes. Previous research on sexual discrepancies has predominately focused on differences in desired frequency of sex, levels of sexual desire, and specific sexual acts that are commonly engaged in (e.g., oral sex, vaginal intercourse, kissing), without simultaneously

assessing the extent to which these feelings and behaviors, as well as broader sexual interests and preferences, are characteristic of a person's ideal preferences in a sexual relationship. As such, relatively little is known about what encompasses people's sexual ideals and the array of preferences and expectations individuals hold for their ideal sexual relationship.

In addition, limited research has examined how met versus unmet sexual ideals are associated with sexual and relationship quality. There is, however, a growing body of research on sexual discrepancies between partners which suggests that partners often have different sexual needs and desires. One of the top three most common disagreements reported by newlywed couples is about when and how frequently to engage in sex (Risch, Riley, & Lawler, 2003), and it is common in long-term relationships for couples to report differences in their levels of sexual desire (Davies, Katz, & Jackson, 1999; Impett & Peplau, 2003; Mark, 2012; Mark & Murray, 2012; Risch et al., 2003) as well as their sexual preferences (Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005; Kohut, Balzarini, Fisher, & Campbell, 2018; Miller & Byers, 2004; Santilla et al., 2007). Indeed, sexual desire differences are frequently reported—in one study, romantic partners reported some degree of desire discrepancy on 5 out of 7 days—even among satisfied couples (Day, Muise, Joel, & Impett, 2015).

Differences in sexual desire or interests between partners might lead to one or both partners having unmet sexual ideals. Although past work has not investigated unmet sexual ideals specifically, differences between partners in their levels of sexual desire or in their preferences for specific sexual behaviors (e.g., sexual intercourse, use of porn) tend to be associated with lower sexual satisfaction and poorer relationship quality (Davies et al., 1999; Kohut et al., 2018; Mark, 2012; Mark & Lasslo, 2018; Santilla, et al., 2007; Willoughby, Farero, & Busby, 2014; Zilbergeld & Ellison, 1980), although some findings are mixed or not

consistently replicated (e.g., Mark, 2014; Mark & Murray, 2012; Rosen, Bailey, & Muise, 2018; Sutherland, Rehman, Fallis, & Goodnight, 2015; Willoughby & Vitas, 2012). With such results in mind, it is important to note that differences between partners' level of sexual desire or interest might not always represent a violation of sexual ideals. For example, if a person has high desire but does not hold the ideal that their partner also needs to have high desire, desire differences might not be overly important for sexual satisfaction (e.g., if something is not important, then perceptions of how much a partner meets this attribute are not associated with relationship evaluations; see Fletcher & Kininmonth, 1992). In contrast, if it is an important ideal that a partner be highly desirous, then if a partner is lower in desire, this might detract from a person's satisfaction with their sex life. Further, given that both cross-sectional (e.g., Butzer & Campbell, 2008; Cupach & Comstock, 1990; Dundon & Rellini, 2010; Litzinger & Gordon, 2005; Webster, Laurenceau, et al., 2015) and longitudinal studies (e.g., Byers, 2005; McNulty & Fisher, 2008; Sprecher, 2002; Yeh, Lorenz, Wickrama, Conger, & Elder, 2006) indicate that a person's satisfaction with their sex life is associated with their overall feelings of satisfaction with, and commitment to, their romantic relationship, sexual problems stemming from unmet sexual ideals may extend beyond the bedroom.

Given the previous research highlighting the typically negative effects of sexual discrepancies, and similar to research on ideal standards for a romantic relationship, we expect that individuals' perceptions of a partner meeting their sexual ideals would be associated with their evaluations of their sexual and relationship quality. Specifically, we expect that when people perceive that their partner does not meet their sexual ideals, they will report lower sexual satisfaction and relationship quality. This is in line with the Ideal Standards Model, in that relationships should be maintained more smoothly and successfully when individuals are in a

relationship with a partner who more closely matches their ideal preferences (Campbell et al., 2013; Campbell et al., 2001; Campbell et al., 2016; Csajbók & Berkics, 2017; Fletcher et al., 2000; Overall et al., 2006). Our prediction is also consistent with interdependence theory (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993) and self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987; Higgins et al., 1985), which would posit that greater discrepancies between one's sexual expectations or ideals and their actual sexual experiences with their partner should result in greater perceived costs and fewer rewards, engendering poorer relationship evaluations.

Sexual Communal Strength

If, in fact, unmet sexual ideals are common in relationships and associated with lower sexual satisfaction and relationship quality, what might mitigate negative associations with unmet sexual ideals? The motivation to care for and be responsive to a partner's needs (Clark & Mills, 2010, 2012) may be one factor, as it appears to be a crucial component of satisfying interpersonal relationships and personal well-being (for a review, see Le et al., 2018). People who are motivated to be responsive to their partner's needs noncontingently—those high in communal strength—tend to be better at navigating situations of conflicting interests and are more satisfied in their relationships, even when they have different interests or when they sacrifice their own preferences for their partner (see Kogan et al., 2010). Responsiveness to a partner's sexual needs specifically has been shown to be associated sexual and relationship quality, above and beyond general responsiveness (Muise, Impett, Kogan, & Desmarais, 2013; Muise & Impett, 2015). That is, people high in *sexual communal strength*—those who are motivated to be responsive to their partner's sexual needs—report higher sexual desire over the course of their relationship (Muise et al., 2013), and have partners who report greater satisfaction with and commitment to their relationships (Muise & Impett, 2015).

Indeed, based on past research, people who are highly motivated to meet their partners' sexual needs more successfully navigate situations of sexual desire discrepancies. In these situations, people higher in sexual communal strength tend to prioritize the benefits for their partner, and in turn, both partners report higher sexual and relationship satisfaction (Day et al., 2015). Importantly, in this past work, sexually communal people still experienced sexual differences with their partner, but they were able to navigate these situations in ways that maintained both partners' satisfaction. This could be, in part, because sexual communal strength is associated with a greater understanding of partners having different sexual interests. For example, people higher in sexual communal strength are more understanding and caring when a partner is not in the mood for sex and they tend to feel less resentment in response to a partner declining their sexual advances (see Kim, Muise, & Impett, 2018). Even among couples coping with extenuating factors that influence their sexual interests and desire (e.g., transitioning to parenthood; Muise, Kim, Impett, & Rosen, 2017) and those coping with clinical sexual issues (e.g., low sexual desire; Hogue, Rosen, Bockaj, Impett, & Muise, 2019; sexual pain; Muise, Bergeron, Impett, & Rosen, 2017), when one partner is higher in sexual communal strength, both partners reported higher sexual and relationship satisfaction. In fact, one of the most commonly reported strategies that women with low sexual desire use to modulate sexual desire (i.e., enhance their own desire or manage desire discrepancies with a partner) was trying to meet their partner's sexual needs (Herbernick, Mullinax, & Mark, 2014).

Buffering against the negative consequences of unmet sexual ideals is important because couples who successfully navigate sexual differences and maintain a strong sexual connection over the course of their relationships are better able to maintain feelings of satisfaction and commitment (Regan, 2000; Rehman et al., 2011). Given the previous research highlighting the

benefits of sexual communal strength in coping with specific types of discrepancies (e.g., desire discrepancies) and in promoting sexual and relationship quality, in the current research we sought to investigate whether sexual communal strength (own and partner's) could buffer against or mitigate the negative associations between unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality. That is, we suspected that people higher in sexual communal strength, or people who had partners higher in sexual communal strength, would be able to maintain sexual satisfaction and relationship quality even in the face of unmet sexual ideals, whereas people lower in sexual communal strength or who had partners lower in sexual communal strength, would report lower sexual satisfaction and relationship quality when sexual ideals were unmet.

Overview of the Current Research

In the current research, we draw on the Ideal Standards Model to investigate sexual ideals in relationships. In line with past research, we predicted that unmet sexual ideals would be associated with lower sexual satisfaction and relationship quality. In addition, we draw on theories of communal motivation to examine whether sexual communal strength buffers the detriments of unmet sexual ideals. Our key prediction is that individuals who are high in sexual communal strength or have sexually communal partners would be buffered against lower sexual satisfaction and relationship quality in the face of unmet sexual ideals. We examined our predictions in six pre-registered studies that employ a variety of methods, including cross-sectional, daily experience sampling, longitudinal, and experimental designs. In Studies 1A and 1B we develop a measure of sexual ideals. In Study 2, a cross-sectional study of long-term romantic couples, we test our key predictions that sexual communal strength buffers against lower sexual satisfaction and relationship quality associated with unmet sexual ideals. In Studies 3 and 4, couples completed a 21-day daily diary. In these two daily experience studies, we

examine how daily changes (e.g., within-person fluctuations) in sexual ideals are associated with daily sexual satisfaction and relationship quality, and test whether people who are higher in sexual communal strength, or who have sexually communal partners, are buffered against experiencing lower sexual and relationship quality on days when they report unmet sexual ideals compared to less communal people. In Study 4, we also include a three-month longitudinal follow-up survey to assess the consequences of unmet sexual ideals and the buffering effect of sexual communal strength over time. In Study 5, we experimentally manipulate both perceptions of a partner's sexual communal strength and met versus unmet sexual ideals in a current relationship to provide causal evidence for the deleterious effects of unmet sexual ideals in relationships, and the buffering effect of perceiving a partner as high in sexual communal strength.

Given the extensive literature on gender differences in sexuality in relationships (see review by Peplau, 2003; Petersen & Hyde, 2010), across the studies, we also conducted exploratory analyses to test whether men versus women are more impacted by unmet sexual ideals, and whether gender moderated the key interaction between unmet sexual ideals and sexual communal strength on sexual and relationship quality. Across many studies and measures, men report more frequent thoughts (Laumann, Gagnon, Michael, & Michaels, 1994) and fantasies about sex (Beck, Bozman, & Qualtrough, 1991), desiring more frequent intercourse (Julien, Bouchard, Gagnon, & Pomerleau, 1992; Leitenberg & Henning, 1995; Sprecher & Regan, 1996), and being more likely to initiate sex (Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001; Byers & Heinlein, 1989; Laumann et al., 1994) compared to women. Therefore, it is possible that unmet sexual ideals may detract more from men's overall sexual and relationship quality compared to women. However, it is not clear whether gender would influence the extent to

which sexual communal strength might buffer negative associations between unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality. Men tend to report higher sexual communal strength compared to women (Muise et al., 2013), although this is driven by gender differences in levels of sexual desire, and in other work, associations between sexual communal strength and sexual and relationship outcomes largely do not differ by gender (see Muise & Impett, 2019 for a review). Additionally, given that sexual frequency (Call, Sprecher, & Schwartz, 1995; Muise, Schimmack, & Impett, 2016) and desire (Muise et al., 2019) are associated with sexual and relationship quality, and sexual frequency (Call et al., 1995) and desire (Klusmann, 2002; McNulty, Wenner, & Fisher, 2016; Sprecher, 2002) tend to fade overtime, we also sought to isolate the effects of unmet ideals to show that the effects are about having unmet sexual ideals specifically, and not just driven by low sexual frequency or desire. More specifically, in Studies 3 and 4, we examined whether the effects remained significant after controlling for sexual frequency and sexual desire.

Study 1

The purpose of the first set of studies was to understand the most relevant sexual ideals that people hold about their relationship. To do so, in Study 1A, we asked people to describe the characteristics that define their ideal sexual behaviors, partner, and relationship. In Study 1B, we assessed the importance of each sexual ideal to reduce the number of items and select a subset of items that represent a variety of sexual ideals.

Study 1A

Method.

Participants and procedure. We recruited 265 participants online from Amazon

Mechanical Turk (MTurk).[1] We required participants to have at least a 97% approval rating, to

speak English, and be over 18 years of age. We excluded 21 participants for failing to meet

criteria, and 42 participants for failing a standard attention check embedded in the survey.[2] The

final sample ($N = 203$) were primarily white (66.5%), heterosexual (78.8%), females (53.2%),

who were in diverse relationships (34% married, 24.2% dating, 27.6% single), and were in their

early 30's on average ($M = 32.10$ years old, $SD = 10.31$). For more information about the

demographics, see Table 1.

Measures.

Sexual ideals. Participants were asked to build a mental picture of their ideal sexual

relationship. Using words or phrases, participants were asked to describe the important (1)

behaviors that they or their partner would engage in within their ideal sexual relationship, (2)

characteristics of their partner (personality traits, physical attributes, qualities) within the ideal

sexual relationship, and (3) characteristics of their ideal sexual encounter (qualities of the

encounter, frequency, etc.). Participants were asked to list as many characteristics or behaviors as

they believed were appropriate to fully conceptualize their sexual ideal and were told that they

could be as explicit as is necessary.

Analytic plan.

The initial goal of our analyses was to identify as many unique sexual ideals as possible

that were endorsed by more than one person. All responses provided by participants regarding

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[1] All portions of Study 1 data were collected in 2017 before concerns about data contamination by bots on MTurk (e.g., https://www.maxhuibai.com/blog/evidence-that-responses-from-repeating-gps-are-random).

[2] As widely employed in the literature (e.g., Berinsky, Margolis, & Sances, 2014; Curran, 2016), all studies (with the exception of Study 1A and Study 4) used attention check questions, wherein we asked participants to select a particular answer choice for that question (e.g., "I am paying attention to this survey. If you are paying attention, select number three."). We made the decision a priori to exclude participants who did not select the instructed value.

their sexual ideals were independently rated by two of the investigators (RB and KD). The investigators compiled notes regarding emerging themes and met to discuss their notes to create a comprehensive list of initial codes that described the meaning of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Any disagreements were resolved through discussion, and when necessary, a collaborator (TK) on the project was asked to weigh in. The final themes consisted of exact wording used by respondents but omitted qualifying terms and treated very similar adjectives as synonymous (e.g., coding monogamous and exclusivity as monogamous; Fehr, 1988; Fletcher et al., 1999; Rosenberg & Sedlak, 1972). Once we reached agreement about the number and nature of initial codes, two of the study's investigators (RB and KD) worked independently to identify the presence of codes across the entire response set. Kappa's (Cohen, 1960) agreement between raters ranged between .82 and .99 across themes indicating high agreement between coders (e.g., McHugh, 2012). Disagreements were resolved by the first author reviewing responses with discrepant codes and determining the appropriate theme. Using the final ratings, the frequency that each item was assessed, and ideals that were endorsed by at least three participants were used in Study 1B (consistent with Fletcher et al., 1999), while responses that were mentioned by two or fewer participants were judged as idiosyncratic and removed. The analytic approach, study rationale, and procedures were pre-registered and can be found on the Open Science Framework (OSF) at: https://osf.io/e3erm/?view_only=10aabf0612324bf5a490c09442c89ba6.

Results. From the open responses 391 unique codes were generated, 219 of which were mentioned by more than two participants. Frequently endorsed sexual ideals included engaging in sexual activities such as oral (37.9%), vaginal (24.6%) and anal sex (14.3%), having a loving (16.3%) and reciprocal (e.g., giving) partner (15.8%), and having a partner who is sexually

adventurous (11.8%). The frequency of ratings for a subset of the items used in future studies can be found in Table 2.

Study 1B

The primary goal of Study 1B was to reduce the number of items that would be used in the subsequent studies, and to ensure the items were broadly applicable and inclusive. Therefore, we sought to select a subset of items that would not be explicitly gendered (i.e., preferences related to specific male or female body parts) and would reflect a variety of sexual behaviors, aspects of the sexual partner, and the sexual environment itself.

Method.

Participants and procedure. In Study 1B, we recruited 1,238 individuals from MTurk and used the same recruitment procedures as Study 1A. Based on the pre-registered criteria for removing participants, 24 participants were excluded for failing to meet criteria, and 528 participants for failing attention and instruction checks embedded in the survey. Participants in the final sample ($N = 686$) were primarily white (69.9%), heterosexual (83.0%), females (50.9%), who were in diverse relationships (28.5% married, 18.3% dating, 48.5% single) and were in their mid 30's on average ($M = 33.95$, $SD = 10.39$). For more information about this study's demographics, see Table 1.

Measures.

Sexual ideals. Participants were asked to build a mental image of their ideal sexual relationship and were then asked to characterize their ideal sexual relationship by providing importance ratings for each unique code generated in Study 1A (219 items) using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *very unimportant in your sexual ideal* and 7 = *very important in your sexual ideal*).

Analytic plan.

Item reduction was guided by four principles that were pre-registered on the OSF prior to data collection (see analytic approach). First, we removed items that differentially applied to a preference for a specific biological sex/gender (e.g., large penis or breasts). This was done through conducting an independent *t*-test to compare men's and women's endorsement of each ideal, and when differences emerged the item was dropped. It was assumed that the remaining items should be similarly applicable to all sexes, genders, and sexual orientations. Second, we selected non-redundant items (Fehr, 1988). To do so, we examined all pairs of correlations and pairs/groups of items with inter-item correlations greater than .7071 (sharing 50% of variance) were dropped. Third, we sought to select a subset of items that ranged in their mean importance. We assumed that item means would be associated with item variances in a curvilinear fashion (i.e., extreme item means would have lower variance than items with moderate means), thus the overarching goal was to ensure that we did not only select items that were very important or very unimportant to most people. To further support this decision, past work has shown that there are three classes of traits (Buss, 1985): (1) traits that everyone wants, (2) traits that are preferred by one gender over the other, and (3) preferred traits that are unique to the individual. In the current research we sought to explore traits that applied to both genders but wanted to ensure we had traits that captured things everyone wants, as well as traits that are unique to the individual. To do so, we grouped items by the proximity of the mean of each item to its closest integer scale point (e.g., item means between 1.50 and 2.49 were grouped as "2"). In this case, items falling into groups indicating extreme importance ("7") and no importance ("1") were dropped. Lastly, from the remaining items, we selected items with large variances. Using items with low variances (i.e., items that most participants rate similarly) would be problematic because if there

are few differences in how people rate items, they are unlikely to be associated with meaningful differences in the outcomes of interest. More specifically, low variance items in the context of this research indicate sexual ideals that are universally sought (or avoided), so including such items would not be meaningfully predictive of other outcomes (e.g., sexual and relationship quality). To account for this, for each of the five scale-related groupings (2 to 6) we selected five items that had the highest variance. While doing so, we examined all pairs of correlations and pairs/groups of items, and items with inter correlations greater than .7071 (sharing 50% of variance) were dropped until we identified 30 items that met all of the criteria that were specified above.

Given that our goals were to provide a large breadth in coverage of sexual ideals with a minimum item set and without limiting the scope of the item set by categorizing these preferences, we used the above approach to reduce the number of items. However, we also conducted additional analyses to determine whether there are meaningful subfactors among this reduced set of items (see Supplemental Materials). More specifically, two subfactors—enjoying sexual variety (e.g., engaging in diverse sexual acts like spanking, talking dirty, and other forms of kinky sex) and having a devoted partner (e.g., having a loving, monogamous partner who is supportive and caring)—emerged in these analyses; though, when we tested for differences across these subscales in subsequent studies (discussed more in Study 2) we found that results for the overall scale (including 30 items) mirrored results for the subscales. Thus, we chose to examine and report the scale as a whole across studies.

The resulting set of items were examined across relevant demographic and relationship factors using one-way ANOVAs. The importance of the items were endorsed equally across sexual orientations ($p = .326$) and differing relationship statuses ($p = .267$); however, the

aggregate endorsement of the 30 items did differ by gender ($F(685) = 3.60$, $p = .012$), with

sexual ideal items being endorsed as slightly more important by males ($M = 4.51$, $SE = .04$)

compared to females ($M = 4.36$, $SE = .04$). Additionally, people in longer relationships tended to

rate the sexual ideal items as more important compared to people in shorter relationships ($r = -.12$, $p < 001$). We confirmed the factor structure and demographic differences in an additional

study which is reported in the online Supplemental Materials.

Discussion

Despite great substantive interest in relationship ideals—Fletcher and colleague's (1999)

seminal paper on ideals in intimate relationships, for instance, had been cited over 600 times

when this article was in preparation—and in understanding the impact of sexual preferences and

discrepancies (e.g., Davies et al., 1999; Santilla et al., 2007), no efforts have been made to

develop a measure of sexual ideals. Therefore, an important first step in examining how met

versus unmet sexual ideals are associated with relationship quality was to identify a subset of

broadly applicable sexual ideal characteristics that could subsequently be used to create a

measure to assess individuals' trait variation in sexual ideals. In Studies 1A and 1B we generated

a list of sexual ideals from the ground up using pre-registered criteria and selected a subset of 30

items encompassing an array of preferences and expectations individuals hold for their ideal

sexual partner and relationship.

Study 2

In Study 2, we used sexual ideal characteristics that were identified in Studies 1A and 1B

to test our two key predictions in a cross-sectional study of romantic couples. First, we test

whether people who report greater unmet sexual ideals report lower sexual and relationship

quality compared to people with met ideals. Next, we test whether people higher in sexual

communal strength, or who have partners higher in sexual communal strength (compared to lower sexual communal strength), would be buffered against the negative associations between unmet sexual ideals and sexual satisfaction and relationship quality. We also explored gender as a potential moderator of the association between unmet sexual ideals and sexual satisfaction and relationship quality and examined whether gender influenced the buffering effect of sexual communal strength. The hypotheses were pre-registered on the OSF.

Method

Participants and procedure. We recruited mixed-sex couples from the United States and Canada through Qualtrics Panel, an online crowdsourcing platform that is commonly used for psychological research. To enter the study, we required couples to be involved in a romantic relationship of at least four months, for both individuals in the relationship to be willing to participate, for participants to be at least 18 years of age, and for participants to meet standard instruction and attention checks. A total of 267 couples accessed the online study, and based on the pre-registered criteria for inclusion, of those, 60 were removed because one or both partners failed one of four attention or instruction checks (22.47%). The final sample ($N = 207$ couples) consisted of couples who were mostly married (88.4%), Caucasian (84.5%), and monogamous (88.9%). The average age ($M = 45.80$ years, $SD = 10.34$) and relationship length ($M = 17.32$ years, $SD = 10.23$) of the sample indicated a tendency towards middle-age and long-term relationships. See Table 1 for more information about the demographics.

Eligible participants completed an online survey that asked both partners to report on the extent to which their partner met their sexual ideals, in addition to their sexual communal strength, sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and commitment. Additional measures were included for other purposes and will not be discussed further in the current paper. For a

complete listing of the measures, please see the OSF. Participants could earn up to $10.50 (USD) per person for their participation.

Measures.

Extent partner meets sexual ideals. The Sexual Ideal Scale asked participants to indicate the extent to which their partner met their sexual ideals (30 items, e.g., "My partner engages in oral sex with me as much I want my ideal sexual partner to"). Participants were asked to respond to each item using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *does not meet my ideal*, 7 = *completely meets my ideal*). The items were reverse coded and then mean aggregated across ideals to create an aggregate score, with higher scores indicating greater unmet sexual ideals (α = .93; *M* = 2.28, *SD* = 1.03).

Sexual satisfaction. The Global Measure of Sexual Satisfaction (five items; GMSEX; Lawrance & Byers, 1998) was used to assess sexual satisfaction. Participants were asked to indicate on 7-point bipolar scales which best described their current sexual relationship: unsatisfying-satisfying, unpleasant-pleasant, good-bad, negative-positive, and worthless-valuable. Items were mean aggregated, with higher scores indicating higher sexual satisfaction (α = .97; *M* = 5.94, *SD* = 1.39). Lawrance and Byers (1998) provided evidence for the reliability and validity of the GMSEX.

Relationship satisfaction. The Investment Model Scale (IMS; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998) was used to assess relationship satisfaction (three items: e.g., "I feel satisfied with our relationship"). Possible responses were on a 9-point scale (1 = *do not agree at all*, 9 = *agree completely*), and the items were mean aggregated, with higher scores indicating more satisfaction (α = .95; *M* = 7.45, *SD* = 1.96). Rusbult and colleagues (1998) provided evidence for the

reliability and validity of the IMS, which includes subscales for relationship satisfaction and commitment.

Commitment. The IMS (Rusbult et al., 1998) was used to assess commitment to the relationship (four items: e.g., "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner"). Possible responses were on a 9-point scale (1 = *do not agree at all*, 9 = *agree completely*), and the items were mean aggregated, with higher scores indicating greater commitment (α = .95; M = 8.29, SD = 1.39).

Sexual communal strength. The Sexual Communal Strength Scale (six items; Muise et al., 2013) was used to assess the degree to which a partner is attuned to and motivated to meet their partner's sexual needs. Participants completed the measure by rating items such as, "How far would you be willing to go to meet your partner's sexual needs?" on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Items were reverse coded when necessary, and were mean aggregated, with higher scores indicating higher sexual communal strength (α = .78, M = 3.93, SD = 0.70). Muise and colleagues (2013) provided evidence for the reliability and validity of the Sexual Communal Strength Scale (also see Muise & Impett, 2019).

Analytic plan.

Our primary goal was to test whether a person's perception of the extent to which their partner meets their sexual ideals was associated with lower sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and commitment, and whether this was moderated by their own and their partner's sexual communal strength. First, we tested whether the extent to which a partner meets one's sexual ideals was associated with both partners' relationship quality with a linear mixed modeling approach guided by the actor-partner independence model (APIM; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). The initial model involved the prediction of an outcome (either sexual satisfaction,

relationship satisfaction, or commitment) using actors' and partners' ratings of the extent to which their partner met their sexual ideals. In a separate model, we assessed whether sexual communal strength moderated the effects (Moderated APIM; see Garcia, Kenny, & Lederman, 2015) by adding to the model both partners' sexual communal strength and the interaction between both partners' sexual communal strength and both partners' ratings of their partner meeting their sexual ideals. That is, the main effects in the model included actor unmet sexual ideals, partner unmet sexual ideals, actor sexual communal strength, and partner sexual communal strength. Further, there were interactions between actor unmet sexual ideals and actor sexual communal strength, actor unmet sexual ideals and partner sexual communal strength, partner unmet sexual ideals and actor sexual communal strength, and partner unmet sexual ideals and partner sexual communal strength. Importantly, we pre-registered the prediction that the interaction between an actor's unmet sexual ideals and the actor and partner's sexual communal strength would buffer the actor's sexual and relationship quality, but we had no expectations about the interaction of the partner's effects and thus these findings can be found in the Supplemental Materials. When an interaction was significant, we tested simple effects at high (one standard deviation above) and low (one standard deviation below) levels of sexual communal strength (Aiken, West, & Reno, 1991). We analysed the effects using the overall ratings of sexual ideals (mean averaged across all 30 items) and among the two factors of the sexual ideal items. We did not have predictions about differences across the two factors for sexual ideals, but we tested whether associations were consistent across subfactors. The results for the overall scale were largely consistent with results for the subscales, so we present the results with the full scale below (see Supplemental Materials for analyses by subscale). The

analytic plan and the data and syntax for these analyses can be found on the OSF. Correlations

between all variables are presented in Table 3.

Results

       Unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality. In line with our pre-

registered predictions, the results of the APIM analyses showed that when people reported that

their partner did not meet their sexual ideals, they reported feeling less satisfied with their sexual

(b = -.47, $t(409)$ = -8.45, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.58, -.36]) and romantic relationship (b = -.77,

$t(409)$ = -10.14, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.92, -.62]), and less committed to maintaining their

relationship (b = -.41, $t(406)$ = -6.77, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.52, -.29]). Additionally, when people

reported that their partner did not meet their sexual ideals, their partner also reported lower

sexual (b = -.29, $t(409)$ = -.5.16, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.40, -.18]) and relationship satisfaction (b = -

.37, $t(409)$ = -.4.92, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.52, -.22]), and less committed to maintaining their

relationship (b = -.36, $t(406)$ = -.5.98, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.48, -.24]).

       Moderating role of sexual communal strength. Next, we tested whether sexual

communal strength buffered against the negative associations between unmet sexual ideals and

sexual and relationship quality. The results of the analyses suggest that both actor and partner

sexual communal strength moderated associations between actors' unmet sexual needs and

indicators of relationship quality, though partners' sexual communal strength appeared to do so

more consistently (see Table 4 and Figures 1A-1B). Specifically, people with partners who were

low in sexual communal strength reported lower sexual satisfaction (b = -.50, $t(358)$ = -6.72, $p <$

.001, 95% CI [-.65, -.35]), relationship satisfaction (b = -.66, $t(411)$ = -7.45, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-

.83, -.48]), and commitment (b = -.37, $t(387)$ = -5.08, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.52, -.23]) when they

themselves reported higher unmet sexual ideals. However, the association between unmet sexual

ideals and sexual and relationship quality were reduced to non-significance (sexual satisfaction: $p = .646$; commitment: $p = .099$) or were attenuated (relationship satisfaction: $b = -.46$, $t(413) = -4.24$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.67, -.24]) among people who had partners who were higher in sexual communal strength. As such, people who had partners who were higher in sexual communal strength were buffered from the negative associations between unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality.

In contrast, of the three interaction effects predicted for actor's communal strength, only the association between unmet sexual ideals and commitment was significantly moderated by a person's own sexual communal strength (see Table 4). That is, for people who were low in sexual communal strength, unmet sexual ideals were associated with feeling significantly lower commitment to the relationship ($b = -.41$, $t(387) = -5.63$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.55, -.27]), whereas the association between unmet sexual ideals and commitment was reduced to non-significance among individuals who were high in sexual communal strength ($b = -.11$, $t(413) = -1.17$, $p = .242$, 95% CI [-.29, .07]). Importantly, and contrary to our predictions, the association between unmet sexual ideals and a person's own sexual ($p = .389$) and relationship ($p = .069$) satisfaction were not moderated by their own sexual communal strength. Partner interactions (e.g., the effects of a partner's unmet ideals and the individual's or the partner's sexual communal strength) can be found in the Supplemental Materials.

Providing evidence for generalizability of the findings. Next, given the extensive literature on gender differences in sexuality in relationships (see review by Peplau, 2003), we conducted additional exploratory analyses to test whether gender moderated the associations between unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality and the key interaction between unmet sexual ideals and sexual communal strength on sexual and relationship quality. Gender

did not significantly moderate effects for sexual or relationship satisfaction, suggesting that in this study the associations between unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship satisfaction are consistent for both men and women. However, gender did moderate the buffering effect of sexual communal strength for one out of six of the reported moderation effects (for more information about gender moderations for interactions involving the partner's unmet sexual ideals, see Supplemental Materials). Although both men and women reported lower commitment when they experienced unmet sexual ideals, the interaction between unmet sexual ideals and a partner's sexual communal strength on commitment was moderated by gender ($b = .34$, $t(351) = 2.30$, $p = .022$, 95% CI [.05, .64]), such that having a partner who is sexually communal only buffered the effect for women ($b = .33$, $t(207) = 3.01$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [.11, .54]) and not men ($p = .751$).

Discussion

The results of Study 2 demonstrate that unmet sexual ideals are associated with lower sexual and relationship quality in romantic relationships. When a person reports unmet sexual ideals in a relationship, both they and their partner report lower sexual and relationship satisfaction and are less committed to their relationship. However, consistent with previous research highlighting the benefits of being attuned to and motivated to meet a partner's sexual needs, having a partner who is high in sexual communal strength buffered people against the negative associations between unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality. Although a person's own sexual communal strength buffered them against reporting lower commitment in the face of unmet ideals, having a sexually communal *partner* buffered people against lower sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and commitment when they reported greater unmet sexual ideals. These findings suggest that having a partner who is highly responsive to one's

sexual needs (e.g., high in sexual communal strength) may be a more important factor for

mitigating against unmet sexual ideals than a person's own sexual communal strength. Finally,

these results were largely consistent for both men and women, indicating they are largely

generalizable across genders.

Study 3

Past research has shown relationship ideals can change over time (Charlot, Balzarini, &

Campbell, 2019), and in fact, other related constructs—such as sexual desire (Day et al., 2015)

and sexual beliefs (Maxwell et al., 2017)—have been shown to fluctuate day-to-day. Therefore,

we expected that people might feel that their sexual ideals are being met more on some days

compared to others. In Study 3, we examined reports of unmet sexual ideals in daily life, and

whether daily fluctuations in unmet sexual ideals would be associated with subsequent

fluctuations in daily sexual satisfaction and relationship quality. To do so, we assessed couples'

reports of sexual communal strength at baseline, and their daily perceptions of unmet sexual

ideals and sexual and relationship quality over a period of 21 days. Consistent with Study 2, we

expected that on days when people reported greater unmet sexual ideals (compared to their own

average across the study), they would report lower daily sexual satisfaction and relationship

quality. Yet, we also expected that people who were high in sexual communal strength, or who

had partners who were high in sexual communal strength, would be buffered against lower daily

sexual satisfaction and relationship quality when faced with unmet sexual ideals. These

hypotheses were pre-registered on the OSF. In this study, we also explored whether gender

influenced the effects and sought to rule out an alternative explanation through assessing whether

sexual frequency accounted for the effects of unmet sexual ideals on sexual and relationship

quality and the buffering effects of sexual communal strength.

Method

Participants and procedure. We recruited 139 mixed-sex couples from the United

States and Canada through advertisements posted on Kijiji and Facebook, an email list of

couples who had previously participated in research in our lab, and flyers posted locally. The

same eligibility criteria for Study 2 were used in Study 3, except couples in Study 3 had to be

cohabitating and had to complete at least three days of the daily diary entries over the course of

the study. Data from 15 couples were excluded because one or both partners did not consent to

participate in the study ($n = 5$) or did not meet inclusion criteria ($n = 10$). The final sample ($N =$

124 couples) consisted of couples who were mostly married (44.1%), Caucasian (72.9%), and

heterosexual (88.6%). On average, most participants were in their early 30s ($M = 30.70$ years, SD

$= 8.96$) and were in long-term relationships ($M = 6.73$ years, $SD = 5.84$). See Table 1 for more

information about the demographics.

Eligible participants completed a 30-minute background survey, in addition to a brief (10

minutes or less) daily survey every day for 21 consecutive days, completed entirely online and

independently from their partner. To maximize participant compliance with the daily diary

responses, reminder emails were sent to the participants who had not completed their diaries

within 3 hours of their start time each day. On average, participants completed 18.81 diaries

across the 21-day study. Participants could earn up to $35 (CAD) per person for their

participation. For more information about the study's measures, please view the measures

document on the OSF.

Measures.

In addition to the key variables, both partners reported their sexual frequency and sexual

desire (see Table 5 for correlations). For the daily (within-person) measures, we used truncated

versions of the focal measures to reduce fatigue, increase efficiency, and minimize participant

attrition (Bolger, Davis, & Rafaeli, 2003).

Baseline measures.

Sexual communal strength. The Sexual Communal Strength Scale (six items; Muise et al.,

2013) was used to assess the tendency to be attuned to and motivated to meet a partner's sexual

needs at baseline. Participants completed the measure by rating items such as, "How far would

you be willing to go to meet your partner's sexual needs?" on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly*

disagree, 5 = *strongly agree*). Items were reverse coded when necessary and mean aggregated,

with higher scores indicating higher sexual communal strength (α = .68; *M* = 4.04, *SD* = 0.59).

Sexual frequency. Sexual frequency during the past two weeks was assessed with one

item asking participants to estimate the number of times they had engaged in sexual intercourse

with their partner (e.g., "Please indicate how many times in the past 2 weeks you and your

partner have engaged in sexual activity"). Responses ranged from 0 to 28 times (*M* = 3.90, *SD* =

3.53).

Daily measures.

Extent partner meets sexual ideals. Participants were asked to rate the extent their partner

met their sexual ideals each day (e.g., "To what extent do you feel your partner met your sexual

ideals today?"). Possible responses were on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *not all*, 7 = *completely*)

and responses were reverse coded, with higher scores indicating greater unmet sexual ideals (*M*

= 3.07, *SD* = 1.95).

Sexual satisfaction. The GMSEX (three items; Lawrance & Byers, 1998) asked

participants to indicate on 7-point bipolar scales which best describes their sexual satisfaction

that day: unsatisfying-satisfying, unpleasant-pleasant, and good-bad. Within-person reliability of

the items (indicated by R_c; Bolger & Laurenceau, 2013) was .96. Items were mean aggregated, with higher scores indicating higher sexual satisfaction ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.95$).

Relationship satisfaction. Participants responded to one item from Hendrick's (1988) Relationship Assessment Scale regarding how satisfied they were with their relationship that day ("How satisfied are you with your relationship?"). Possible responses were on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *not at all*, 5 = *a great deal*). Higher scores indicate higher relationship satisfaction ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 0.83$).

Commitment. The IMS (three items; Rusbult et al., 1998) was used to assess commitment (e.g., "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner"; $R_c = .90$) among couples. Possible responses were on a 9-point Likert scale (1 = *do not agree at all*, 7 = *agree completely*), and the items were mean aggregated, with higher scores indicating higher commitment ($M = 6.48$, $SD = 0.95$).

Analytic plan.

To test whether unmet sexual ideals are associated with lower relationship and sexual quality in daily life, we tested a two-level crossed model with random intercepts, where persons were crossed with days and nested within couples to account for the fact that both partners completed the daily surveys on the same days (Kenny et al., 2006). The analyses were guided by the APIM, such that both a person's own score and their partner's score for unmet sexual ideals were entered simultaneously as predictors in the model (Kenny et al., 2006). Daily predictors (i.e., unmet sexual ideals) were partitioned into their within- and between-variance components, which were person-mean centered and aggregated (and grand-mean centered) respectively (Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, & Congdon, 2004; Zhang, Zyphur, & Preacher, 2009). The benefit of assessing unmet sexual ideals at the daily level is that we can test the effects of within-person

differences (i.e., daily fluctuations in unmet sexual ideals) while accounting for between-person differences.

We then tested whether participant's own and their partner's sexual communal strength moderated the daily effects. The analyses were APIM cross-level moderations, such that both a person's own score and their partner's scores for daily unmet sexual ideals (both person mean centered daily predictors and aggregates of daily predictors) and baseline actor sexual communal strength and partner sexual communal strength (grand mean centered), plus the interactions between all terms, were entered simultaneously as predictors in the model (Garcia et al., 2015). We predicted that the association between one's unmet sexual ideals would be buffered by their own or their partner's sexual communal strength, but we had no expectations about the interaction of the partner's effects and thus these findings can be found in the Supplemental Materials. When an interaction was significant, we proceeded to test simple effects at high (one standard deviation above) and low (one standard deviation below) levels of sexual communal strength (Aiken et al., 1991). The analytic plan and the data and syntax for these analyses can be found on the OSF. Correlations between all variables are in Table 5.

Results

Unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality in daily life. Results from the multi-level dyadic models showed that on days when people reported higher unmet sexual ideals than their average, they felt less satisfied with their sexual ($b = -.64$, $t(4044) = -52.99$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.66, -.61]) and romantic relationship ($b = -.08$, $t(3960) = -15.79$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.09, -.07]), and also reported feeling less committed to maintaining their relationship ($b = -.06$, $t(3888) = -8.88$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.07, -.04]). On days when participants reported having more unmet sexual ideals than typical, their partner also reported lower sexual satisfaction ($b = -.14$,

$t(4045) = -11.85$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.17, -.12]), relationship satisfaction ($b = -.02$, $t(3961) = -3.23$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [-.03, -.01]), and commitment ($b = -.01$, $t(3889) = -2.06$, $p = .04$, 95% CI [-.02, -.001]).

The moderating role of sexual communal strength. As predicted and consistent with Study 2, the association between daily unmet sexual ideals and a person's own sexual and relationship quality was moderated by their partner's sexual communal strength (see Table 6, Figures 2). That is, people with partners low in sexual communal strength reported lower relationship and sexual quality when they reported more unmet ideals (sexual satisfaction: $b = -.67$, $t(3003) = -32.22$, $p = .04$, 95% CI [-.71, -.62]; relationship satisfaction: $b = -.10$, $t(2993) = -12.02$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.12, -.09]; and commitment: $b = -.08$, $t(2988) = -7.53$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.10, -.06]). However, the association between daily unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality were attenuated, although still significant, among individuals who had partners who were higher in sexual communal strength (sexual satisfaction: $b = -.61$, $t(3001) = -31.73$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.64, -.57]; relationship satisfaction: $b = -.06$, $t(2986) = -7.76$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.08, -.05]; and commitment: $b = -.05$, $t(2981) = -4.86$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.07, -.03]).

Similar to Study 2, the moderating role of one's own sexual communal strength was less consistent across outcomes. While the association between unmet sexual ideals and a person's relationship satisfaction was moderated by their own sexual communal strength (see Table 6)—such that the association between daily unmet sexual ideals and relationship satisfaction was attenuated, although still significant among individuals who were higher in sexual communal strength ($b = -.07$, $t(2984) = -9.06$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.09, -.06]), compared to individuals who were lower in sexual communal strength ($b = -.09$, $t(2993) = -10.90$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.11, -.08])—the effects for sexual satisfaction and commitment were mixed. The association between

unmet sexual ideals and a person's own sexual satisfaction was moderated by their own sexual communal strength; however, the effect was in the opposite direction to our predictions and to the findings in Study 2. More specifically, unmet sexual ideals were associated with lower sexual satisfaction for people high in sexual communal strength (b = -.68, $t(2998)$ = -35.99, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.71, -.64]) and the association was slightly attenuated for people lower in sexual communal strength (b = -.59, $t(3003)$ = -28.71, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.64, -.55]). The association between unmet sexual ideals and commitment was not moderated by their own sexual communal strength ($p = .119$).

Ruling out alternative explanations and providing evidence for generalizability of the findings. Given that the data are correlational, in exploratory analyses we aimed to isolate the direction of the effects by accounting for the previous day's outcome variable. Accounting for people's satisfaction on the previous day, on days when they reported greater unmet ideals they did on average, they reported lower sexual and relationship. However, the interaction between unmet sexual ideals and a partner's sexual communal strength in predicting commitment was reduced to marginally significant when controlling for commitment the previous day ($p = .081$). More information about these analyses can be found in the Supplement Materials.

Next, we conducted additional exploratory analyses to rule out possible alternative explanations and provide evidence for the generalizability of our findings. First, our primary prediction is that unmet sexual ideals are associated with lower sexual and relationship quality, but people who are higher or have partners who are higher in sexual communal strength are buffered against the negative association between unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality. Given that unmet ideals are associated with having less frequent sex (r = -

.17, p = .013), and sexual communal strength is associated with more frequent sex (actor sexual

communal strength: r = .17, p = .025; partner sexual communal strength; r = .19, p = .014), we

wanted to rule out the possibility that the buffering effect of sexual communal strength is solely

attributed to engaging in more frequent sex to increase our confidence that it is sexual communal

strength buffering the effects and not increased sexual activity. To test this, we re-ran the daily

analyses controlling for couples' sexual frequency at baseline, and all of the significant effects

reported above remained significant.

Finally, as in Study 2, we tested whether gender moderated the associations between

unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality, as well as the key interaction between

unmet sexual ideals and sexual communal strength on sexual and relationship quality. In most

cases, gender did not moderate the main effects or the interactions. In one instance, however,

gender moderated the association between reports of unmet sexual ideals and one's own

commitment, b = .04, $t(2542)$ = 2.51, p = .012, 95% CI [.01, .07], such that the association

between unmet sexual ideals and lower commitment were stronger among men (b = -.08, $t(1500)$

= -7.44, p < .001, 95% CI [-.10, -.06]) compared to women (b = -.04, $t(1501)$ = -3.39, p = .001,

95% CI [-.06, -.02]), but significant for both. Furthermore, gender did not moderate the buffering

effect of a partner's sexual communal strength, but it did moderate two of the effects of actor's

sexual communal strength. Specifically, gender significantly moderated the interaction between a

person's unmet sexual ideals and their own sexual communal strength on their own sexual

satisfaction (b = -.13, $t(2889)$ = -2.57, p = .010, 95% CI [-.22, -.03]) and commitment (b = .05,

$t(2949)$ = 2.20, p = .028, 95% CI [.01, .10]). Although both men and women reported lower

sexual satisfaction and commitment when they experienced unmet sexual ideals, the buffering

effect of one's own sexual communal strength on sexual satisfaction (women: b = -.13, $t(1497)$ =

3.89, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.19, -.06]; men: $p = .970$) and commitment (women: $b = .05$, $t(1500) =$ 2.79, $p = .005$, 95% CI [.01, .08]; men: $p = .638$) was significant for women, but not for men. However, there were some differences in how women's own sexual communal strength moderated the effects. More specifically, while the association between unmet sexual ideals and women's own sexual satisfaction was moderated by their own sexual communal strength, the effect was in the opposite direction to our predictions: unmet sexual ideals were associated with lower sexual satisfaction for women higher in sexual communal strength ($b = -.74$, $t(1498) = -24.28$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.80, -.68]) and the association was slightly attenuated for women lower in sexual communal strength ($b = -.59$, $t(1499) = -20.16$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.65, -.53]). In contrast and consistent with the predicted direction of effects, the association between daily unmet sexual ideals and commitment was reduced to non-significance among women who were higher in sexual communal strength ($p = .453$), compared to women who were lower in sexual communal strength ($b = -.07$, $t(1501) = -4.47$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.09, -.04]). This suggests that sexual communal strength buffered the negative effects of unmet sexual ideals for women's reports of commitment but not men's, which is the opposite from Study 2 wherein men's but not women's commitment was buffered by sexual communal strength.

Discussion

This study provides support for the negative effects of unmet sexual ideals and the moderating role of a partner's sexual communal strength on associations between unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality in daily life. The buffering effects of a partner's sexual communal strength were robust and emerged even when controlling for couples' sexual frequency and were largely consistent across men and women (with the exception of the results for commitment). However, as in Study 2, evidence for the moderating role of one's own sexual

communal strength were less consistent, presenting null results or contrasting findings across the outcomes. Having a *partner* who was high in sexual communal strength had a more consistent buffering effect on the associations between unmet sexual ideals and lower relationship quality than one's own sexual communal strength. Notably, even when the effects were moderated, the negative effects of unmet ideals were still significant for people with highly communal partners. That is, at least in daily life, even if a partner is sexually responsive, unmet sexual ideals are still associated with lower sexual satisfaction and relationship quality.

Study 4

Having demonstrated the effects of unmet sexual ideals on sexual and relationship quality in dyadic cross-sectional (Study 2) and daily experience (Study 3) studies, we next sought to replicate and extend the findings by examining whether unmet sexual ideals and the moderation by sexual communal strength are associated with changes in sexual and relationship quality over time. To do so, we assessed couples' reports of sexual communal strength at baseline, their perceptions of unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality in daily life over a period of 21 days, and their sexual and relationship quality three months later. Consistent with Study 3, we expected that on days when people reported greater unmet sexual ideals (compared to their own average), they would report lower daily sexual and relationship satisfaction, and commitment. We further predicted that when individuals reported more unmet sexual ideals over the 21-day diary study (aggregated across daily measures), both partners would report feeling less satisfied with their sexual and romantic relationship and lower commitment three months later (controlling for their baseline reports). However, we expected that people who had partners who were high in sexual communal strength would be buffered against lower daily sexual satisfaction and relationship quality when faced with unmet sexual ideals and would not report

lower sexual satisfaction and relationship quality three months later. Because the moderating role of one's own sexual communal strength in buffering the association between unmet sexual ideals and sexual satisfaction and relationship quality were inconsistent in Studies 2 and 3, we did not have any specific predictions for this study. Overall, based on the findings of our previous studies we expected one's partner's sexual communal strength would be a stronger and more consistent moderator of the negative associations between unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality. These hypotheses were pre-registered on the OSF.

Method

> **Participants and procedure.** A new sample of mixed-sex couples ($N = 126$) were recruited from various sources in Canada and the United States, including Kijiji, Facebook, Reddit, Craigslist, an email list of past participants interested in participating in future research, and advertisements (e.g., Canadian university campuses, public transportation centers). The same eligibility criteria for Studies 2 and 3 were used in Study 4, except couples in Study 4 had to be sexually active in their current relationship, had to be living together or seeing each other 5/7 days per week, and in a relationship for two or more years. One couple was excluded because they only completed the baseline survey of the study ($n = 2$). Most participants were white (65.6%) heterosexuals (81.4%) who were on average in their early 30s ($M = 32.63$ years, $SD = 10.17$) and were in long-term relationships ($M = 5.11$ years, $SD = 3.51$). The sample consisted of men ($n = 115$), women ($n = 124$), and several participants who identified with another gender ($n = 2$). See Table 1 for more information about the demographics.

> The procedure of Study 4 was the same as Study 3, except after completing the daily surveys, couples were asked to take a follow-up questionnaire that included measures of sexual and relationship quality three months later. On average, participants completed 18.39 diaries

across the 21-day study, and 214 participants (88%) completed the follow-up survey. As

compensation for taking part in this study, couples were provided the opportunity to earn up to

$120 CAD/$96 USD ($60 CAD/ $48 USD) for each couple member if they participated in all

aspects of the study. For more information about the study's procedures and measures, please

view the measures document on the OSF.

Baseline and follow-up measures.

Baseline measures were assessed the day before the 21-day diary study began. For the

follow-up survey, couples were asked to complete the measures three months after completing

the 21-day diary study.

Sexual communal strength. The Sexual Communal Strength Scale (four items; Muise et

al., 2013) was used to assess the tendency to be attuned to and motivated to meet a partner's

sexual needs. Participants completed the measure by rating items such as, "How far would you

be willing to go to meet your partner's sexual needs?" (Muise, et al., 2013) on a 5-point Likert

scale (0 = *not at all*, 4 = *extremely*). Items were mean aggregated, with higher scores indicating

more sexual communal strength (α = .74; *M* = 3.33, *SD* = 0.58).[3]

Sexual satisfaction. The GMSEX (five items; Lawrance & Byers, 1998) asked

participants to indicate on 7-point bipolar scales which best describes their overall sexual

satisfaction: bad-good, unpleasant-pleasant, negative-positive, unsatisfying-satisfying, worthless-

valuable. Items were mean aggregated, with higher scores indicating higher sexual satisfaction at

baseline (α = .96; *M* = 6.01, *SD* = 1.40) and in the follow-up survey (α = .97; *M* = 5.83, *SD* =

1.50).

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[3] Note that we pre-registered and initially included the standard 6-item measure, but the reliability was low when we
included the two reverse-coded items. The measure was reliable, however, without the reverse-coded items. As
such, we proceeded with the 4-item measure.

Relationship satisfaction. The Perceived Relationship Quality Component (three items;

PRQC; Fletcher, et al., 2000) was used to assess relationship satisfaction at baseline and three

months later (i.e., "How satisfied are you with your relationship?; How content are you with your

relationship?; How happy are you with your relationship?"). Possible responses were on a 7-

point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*), and items were mean aggregated, with higher scores

indicating higher relationship satisfaction at baseline ($\alpha = .95$; $M = 6.14$, $SD = 0.92$) and in the

follow-up survey ($\alpha = .94$; $M = 5.97$, $SD = 1.16$).

Commitment. The PRQC (Fletcher, et al., 2000) was used to assess commitment at

baseline (two items; e.g., "How committed are you to your relationship?"; "How dedicated are

you to your relationship?") and three months later (a single item: e.g., "How committed are you

to your relationship?"). Possible responses were on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*),

and items were mean aggregated (for baseline), with higher scores indicating higher commitment

at baseline ($\alpha = .83$; $M = 6.69$, $SD = 0.59$) and in the follow-up survey ($M = 6.58$, $SD = 0.86$).

Sexual frequency. Sexual frequency during the past 30 days was assessed with seven

items about different types of sexual activity (i.e., oral sex [giving to partner], oral sex [receiving

from partner], giving manual stimulation [touching or massaging your partner's genitals],

receiving manual stimulation [your partner touching or massaging your genitals], manual

stimulation [masturbation; alone], sexual intercourse with vaginal penetration, sexual intercourse

with anal penetration). Possible response options were on a 6-point scale (0 = *not at all*, 6 = *more

than once a day*), with higher scores indicating greater sexual frequency ($\alpha = .85$, $M = 1.98$, SD

$= 1.03$).

Sexual desire. Sexual desire during the past 30 days was assessed with two items (i.e.,

"Over the past 4 weeks, how often did you feel sexual desire or interest for your partner?" and

"Over the past 4 weeks, how would you rate your level (degree) of sexual desire or interest?").

Possible responses were on a 5-point scale (1 = *almost always or always/very high*, 5 = *almost*

never or never/very low or none at all), and the items were reverse coded and mean aggregated

with higher scores indicating greater sexual desire (α = .82, M = 3.79, SD = 0.90).

Daily measures.

We used shortened versions of the focal measures in the daily portion of the diary study

to reduce fatigue, increase efficiency, and minimize participant attrition (Bolger et al., 2003).

Extent partner meets sexual ideals. Participants were asked to rate the extent their

partner met their ideals (e.g., "My partner met my sexual ideals today") each day. Possible

responses were on a 7-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) and responses were

reverse coded, with higher scores indicating greater unmet ideals (M = 3.19, SD = 1.94).

Sexual satisfaction. Five items from the GMSEX (Lawrance & Byers, 1998) asked

participants to indicate on 7-point bipolar scales which best describes their sexual satisfaction

that day: bad-good, unpleasant-pleasant, negative-positive, unsatisfying-satisfying, worthless-

valuable. Items were mean aggregated, with higher scores indicating higher sexual satisfaction

(R_c = .96; M = 5.55, SD = 1.68).

Relationship satisfaction. Participants responded to one item from Fletcher et al.'s

(2000) PRQC on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*) regarding how satisfied they were

with their relationship that day ("How satisfied were you with your relationship?"). Higher

scores on this item indicate higher relationship satisfaction (M = 6.04, SD = 1.25).

Commitment. The PRQC (Fletcher et al., 2000) was used to assess commitment (a single

item: i.e., "How committed were you to your relationship?") among couples. Possible responses

were on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *extremely*), with higher scores indicating higher

commitment (*M* = 6.46, *SD* = 1.00).

Analytic plan.

The analytic strategy for daily effects were the same as Study 3. We also tested whether

couples' reports of unmet sexual ideals over the course of the 21-day daily experience study

predicted changes in their sexual satisfaction and relationship quality three months later and

whether this was moderated by baseline reports of sexual communal strength. These analyses

allow us to test if unmet sexual ideals in daily life are associated with declines in sexual and

relationship quality over time. Further, this allows us to assess whether having a partner who is

more responsive to one's sexual needs (e.g., higher in sexual communal strength) can help buffer

the negative associations between unmet sexual ideals and sexual satisfaction and relationship

quality over time. To test these longitudinal effects, we created two aggregate variables—one for

each partner's unmet sexual ideals over the course of the 21-day study—and entered them as

simultaneous predictors of participants' sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and

commitment measured three months after they completed the diary study, controlling for these

same variables at background. We then included baseline ratings of each partner's sexual

communal strength, all interactions between partner's unmet sexual ideals and sexual communal

strength, and entered these as simultaneous predictors of sexual satisfaction, relationship

satisfaction, and commitment (assessed separately). The analytic plan and the data and syntax for

these analyses can be found on the OSF. Correlations between primary measures can be found in

Table 7.

Results

Unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality in daily life. Results of the multi-level dyadic models showed that, consistent with Study 3 and our pre-registered predictions, on days when people reported higher unmet sexual ideals (compared to their own average), they reported feeling less satisfied with their sexual ($b = -.27$, $t(3785) = -26.61$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.29, -.25]) and romantic relationship ($b = -.22$, $t(3925) = -22.19$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.23, -.19]), and reported being less committed to their relationship ($b = -.10$, $t(3709) = -12.76$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.11, -.08]). Similarly, on days when people reported higher unmet sexual ideals, their partner reported lower sexual satisfaction ($b = -.08$, $t(3785) = -7.71$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.10, -.06]), relationship satisfaction ($b = -.06$, $t(3925) = -6.66$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [-.08, -.05]), and commitment ($b = -.02$, $t(3709) = -2.25$, $p = .02$, 95% CI [-.03, -.00]).

Moderating role of sexual communal strength. First, as predicted, the association between a person's daily unmet sexual ideals and their own sexual satisfaction was moderated by their partner's sexual communal strength (see Table 8). That is, people with partners low in sexual communal strength reported significantly lower sexual satisfaction on days when they had higher unmet sexual ideals ($b = -.31$, $t(3972) = -21.36$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.33, -.28]), but the association between daily unmet sexual ideals and lower sexual satisfaction was significantly attenuated among people with partners who were higher in sexual communal strength ($b = -.21$, $t(3847) = -15.29$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.24, -.05]). Contrary to our predictions and findings from Studies 2 and 3, the association between unmet sexual ideals and a person's own relationship satisfaction ($p = .286$) and commitment ($p = .286$) was not moderated by their partner's sexual communal strength. Additionally, the association between unmet sexual ideals and a person's own sexual satisfaction ($p = .419$), relationship satisfaction ($p = .610$) and commitment ($p = .626$) was not moderated by their own sexual communal strength (see Table 8).

Follow-up analyses. Next, we tested our predictions concerning how unmet sexual ideals reported over the course of the 21-day daily experience study were associated with changes in sexual satisfaction and relationship quality over time, and whether these associations were moderated by a partner's sexual communal strength. After accounting for the outcome at background, people who reported more unmet sexual ideals over the course of the 21-day daily experience study reported declines in sexual ($b = -.51$, $t(191) = -7.40$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.64, -.37]) and relationship satisfaction ($b = -.15$, $t(195) = -2.92$, $p = .004$, 95% CI [-.25, -.05]) and commitment ($b = -.17$, $t(202) = -4.43$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.24, -.09]) three months later. Their partner also reported declines in sexual ($b = -.18$, $t(187) = -2.73$, $p = .007$, 95% CI [-.31, -.05]) and relationship satisfaction ($b = -.42$, $t(193) = -8.54$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.51, -.32]) three months later, but not lower commitment ($p = .214$).

One of the overtime associations was moderated by partner's sexual communal strength. The association between unmet sexual ideals over the course of the study and a person's own sexual satisfaction three months later was moderated by their partner's sexual communal strength ($b = .22$, $t(191) = 2.34$, $p = .020$, 95% CI [.03, .40]). That is, the effect of unmet sexual ideals during the 21-day daily experience study on sexual satisfaction three months later was attenuated, although still significant, among individuals who had partners who were higher in sexual communal strength ($b = -.34$, $t(183) = -3.62$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.52, -.15]), compared to people with partners low in sexual communal strength ($b = -.59$, $t(191) = -7.11$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.75, -.42]; See Figure 3). However, the association between unmet sexual ideals over the course of the study and a person's own relationship satisfaction ($p = .812$) and commitment ($p = .401$) three months later was not moderated by their partner's sexual communal strength. This suggests that unmet sexual ideals were associated with decreased sexual satisfaction, relationship

satisfaction, and commitment three months later, but that having a partner higher in sexual communal strength only buffered the effects for sexual satisfaction.

Providing evidence for generalizability and ruling out alternative explanations of the findings. As in Study 3, we wanted to rule out the possibility that sexual frequency was driving the effects. To test this, in exploratory analyses we re-ran the daily and follow-up analyses controlling for couples' sexual frequency, and all of the significant effects reported above remained significant. In this study we also wanted to rule out that the buffering effects were driven by a person's level of desire. Given that sexual communal strength has been shown to be associated with higher desire (Muise et al., 2013), we re-ran the analyses controlling for desire, and all significant effects remained significant.

We further sought to assess whether gender moderated the effects for both the daily and follow-up analyses. In most cases, gender did not influence the main effects or the interactions. In one instance, however, gender moderated the association between reports of daily unmet sexual ideals and one's own reports of their daily sexual satisfaction ($b = .04$, $t(3886) = 2.45$, $p = .014$, 95% CI [.01, .08]), such that the effects for sexual satisfaction were stronger among men ($b = -.31$, $t(1858) = -20.73$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.34, -.28]) compared to women ($b = -.22$, $t(1973) = -15.60$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.25, -.20]), but significant for both. Furthermore, gender did not moderate the buffering effect of a partner's sexual communal strength, and with two exceptions, gender did not moderate the buffering effect of a person's own sexual communal strength. More specifically, gender significantly moderated the interaction between a person's unmet sexual ideals and their own sexual communal strength on their own daily sexual satisfaction ($b = -.11$, $t(3862) = -2.56$, $p = .010$, 95% CI [-.03, -.19]) and daily commitment ($b = .07$, $t(3898) = 2.13$, $p = .033$, 95% CI [.01, .13]). Although both men and women reported lower sexual satisfaction and

commitment when they experienced unmet sexual ideals, the buffering effect of one's own sexual communal strength was marginally significant for men's report of sexual satisfaction (women: $p = .152$; men: $b = -.07$, $t(1835) = -1.95$, $p = .051$, 95% CI [-.14, .003]) and was not significant for men's or women's reports of commitment (women: $p = .105$; men: $p = .153$). When we probed the interaction for sexual satisfaction, we found that while the association between unmet sexual ideals and men's own sexual satisfaction was moderated by their own sexual communal strength, the effect was in the opposite direction to our predictions: unmet sexual ideals were associated with lower sexual satisfaction for men who were higher in sexual communal strength ($b = -.32$, $t(1836) = -15.85$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.36, -.28]) and the association was slightly attenuated for men who were lower in sexual communal strength ($b = -.24$, $t(1834) = -7.23$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.30, -.17]).

Discussion

Consistent with our previous findings, the results of Study 4 suggest that on days when individuals experience greater unmet sexual ideals, they report poorer sexual and relationship satisfaction, and lower commitment, as do their partners. However, while the association between unmet sexual ideals and sexual satisfaction was weakened when individuals had partners who were high in sexual communal strength, inconsistent with Studies 2 and 3, the buffering effect of having a communal partner did not extend to relationship satisfaction or commitment in this study. Furthermore, results suggest that the effects of unmet sexual ideals endure over time, with greater unmet sexual ideals over the course of the 21-day diary study predicting decreases in sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction, and commitment from background to the three-month follow-up. Similar to the daily findings, we found that having a partner who is high in sexual communal strength buffered people against declines in their sexual

satisfaction over time due to having unmet sexual ideals but did not buffer against declines in relationship satisfaction and commitment. This provides the first evidence that having a sexually communal partner might help people maintain sexual satisfaction over time, even when they have unmet ideals. Across the studies thus far we see that the effects are strongest and most consistent for sexual satisfaction; thus, it is possible that the domain-specific effects are the strongest, but there may be more nuance in when and how these effects extend to broader relationship outcomes.

Study 5

Studies 1-4 demonstrate that unmet sexual ideals are consistently associated with lower sexual and relationship quality; yet, across these studies, having a partner who was highly responsive to one's sexual needs tended to buffer the negative associations between unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality. However, because the previous studies employed correlational designs, we cannot make causal claims. Although we expect unmet sexual ideals to be driving the effects on sexual and relationship quality, it is also possible that, for example, less satisfied people are more likely to report unmet sexual ideals or that having one's sexual ideals met makes it easier for a partner to be responsive. The goal of Study 5 was to extend these findings by examining unmet sexual ideals and perceived partner sexual communal strength using an experimental design. Experimentally manipulating these constructs, as opposed to examining trait measures, enhances our ability to make causal claims about the role of having a sexually communal partner in buffering against lower relationship and sexual quality among those with unmet ideals, and to rule out the possibility that the associations with relationship quality are driven by other unmeasured variables. We designed an experiment in which people were first assigned to engage in a task that led them to see their partner as either more responsive

to their sexual needs (i.e., high in sexual communal strength), or less unresponsive to their sexual

needs (i.e., low sexual communal strength), or they were assigned to a control group. Next, they

were given false feedback that indicated that they were either compatible (i.e., their partner

meets their sexual ideals) or incompatible (i.e., their partner does not meet their sexual ideals)

with their romantic partner.

Therefore, this study was a 3 (high partner sexual responsiveness, low partner sexual

responsiveness, control) by 2 (unmet sexual ideals, met sexual ideals) design. We expected that

people who were made to believe their sexual ideals were unmet by their partner would report

lower sexual and relationship quality compared to people made to believe their sexual ideals

were met. However, our key prediction was that among those manipulated to have unmet sexual

ideals, they would report higher sexual and relationship quality when they also believed their

partner was highly responsive to their sexual needs, compared to those who perceived their

partner to be low in sexual responsiveness or compared to the control condition. In other words,

we predicted that individuals who were led to believe that their partner was responsive to their

sexual needs would be buffered against the lower sexual and relationship quality that

accompanies unmet (compared to met) sexual ideals. All of the predictions were pre-registered

on the OSF prior to collecting data.

Method

Participants and procedure. A pre-registered power analysis indicated that 618

participants would be needed to estimate a small to medium effect ($f = .18$) with 95% power

(power estimated using G-Power 3.1; Erdfelder, Faul, & Buchner, 1996; Faul, Erdfelder,

Buchner, & Lang, 2009). To account for incomplete surveys and attrition, we oversampled by

approximately 25%. We recruited 799 individuals from the United States, Canada, and Europe

through Prolific (https://www.prolific.co/), an online crowdsourcing platform that is commonly used for psychological research. Individuals who were at least 18 years old, who had been in a romantic relationship for at least six months, residing in the United States, Canada, or Europe, who are able to read and write in English, and who had access to a computer were eligible to participate. Based on our pre-registered criteria, data from 181 individuals (22.65%) were excluded because they incorrectly identified the compatibility feedback they were provided or did not remember what it was ($N = 99$, 12.4%), they indicated that they were suspicious and did not believe the feedback they were provided ($N = 42$, 5.26%), or they viewed the feedback for less than 10 seconds ($N = 40$, 4.9%). Additional information about the suspicion and manipulation checks can be found below. The final sample consisted of 618 individuals (males: 33.3%; females 66.0%, 0.7% other) who were mostly dating (47.4) or married (46.0%), Caucasian (90.6%), heterosexual (86.6%), and monogamous (97.7%). On average, most participants were in their mid 30s ($M = 34.80$ years old, $SD = 15.19$) and were in long-term relationships ($M = 5.99$ years, $SD = 3.40$). See Table 1 for more information about the demographics.

Participants who met the study's criteria and consented to participate were told that the purpose of this study was to learn more about people's romantic and sexual experiences. After providing consent, participants were told that research has shown that people can be grouped into different categories based on their responses to a series of questions they were asked to answer. We then told participants that we would perform such groupings based on their responses to these questions and would give them feedback later in the study. Participants then answered a series of compatibility questions, which included questions about their sexual ideals and their perception of their partner's ideals. After completing the compatibility questions, participants

were asked to provide their demographic information. After the demographic questions, the participants were then exposed to a perceived partner sexual communal strength manipulation, followed by the sexual compatibility manipulation. That is, this study involved two manipulations:

1.   We manipulated perceived partner sexual communal strength (adapted from Reis, Lee, O'Keefe, & Clark, 2018) by asking participants to either list two ways that their partner was attentive to their sexual needs or preferences in the last month (high sexual communal strength), to list 10 ways their partner was attentive to their sexual needs (low sexual communal strength), or to list five things their partner carries around with them (control condition). The logic of this manipulation—based on a general approach developed by Schwarz et al. (1991)—is that it should be easy to recall 2 things that a partner has done, which should activate feelings that a partner is highly responsive to one's sexual needs. However, recalling 10 examples should be more difficult, and this difficulty should lead participants to perceive that their partner is not as responsive to their sexual needs. In fact, in a pilot study of 186 people recruited on Prolific, those in the high sexual communal strength condition did perceive their partner as more sexually responsive compared to those in the low condition ($p =.020$), but did not significantly differ from those in the control condition ($p = .337$; See Supplemental Materials).

2.   After completing this task, participants were given false feedback about their compatibility with their partner. That is, adapting a previous false feedback manipulation used by Maxwell and colleagues (2017), we told participants that the results show that their partner does not meet their sexual ideals and their sexual compatibility is low (36th percentile), or that their partner meets their sexual ideals and their sexual compatibility is high (86th percentile) based on an algorithm that has been well-established in the field. Importantly, this feedback was not based

on their actual answers, rather participants were randomly assigned to either the high or low

compatibility conditions.

Finally, participants were asked to complete a series of questions about their relationship

quality (e.g., sexual and relationship satisfaction, commitment), several manipulation checks, and

at the very end of the survey participants were asked suspicion check questions. Upon

completion, participants were given a debriefing form that provided more information about the

purpose of the study and were asked to provide post-debriefing consent to participation (post-

debriefing consent is asked due to the deceit employed in this study). The survey took

approximately 10-15 minutes, and as compensation for taking part in this study, individuals were

provided $1.59 USD (e.g., £1.25 GBP; €1.40 EUR; $2.09 CAD). For more information about the

study's measures, please view the measures document on the OSF:

https://osf.io/wsc9v/?view_only=ad0182e0ea404652b0ce86c73243fb19.

Manipulation and suspicion checks.

Perceived partner sexual communal strength manipulation check. Two manipulation

checks were included for the perceived partner sexual communal strength manipulation. First,

immediately after completing the manipulation (described above) participants were asked to

indicate how difficult the task was on a 7-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 7 = *very difficult*). The idea

is that it should be relatively difficult to recall 10 things a partner has done to be sexually

responsive, whereas it should be relatively easy to recall two things a partner has done to be

sexually responsive, or five things a partner carries around with them. Second, after completing

the outcome measures, participants were asked to rate two items that assessed their perception of

their partner's sexual communal strength post-manipulation (e.g., "My partner is motivated to

meet my sexual needs" and "My partner understands my sexual needs") on a 7-point scale (1 =

do not agree at all, 7 = *agree completely*). These two items were mean aggregated with higher scores indicating higher perceived partner sexual communal strength (α = .87, M = 5.41, SD = 1.60).

Unmet sexual ideal manipulation check. For the unmet sexual ideal manipulation, three manipulation checks were included. First, immediately after being provided with the sexual compatibility feedback (described above) participants were told that we want to make sure the feedback they received was clear, and they were asked via an open response question to tell us what the results said about their compatibility with their partner, and if they were not sure they could write "I don't know." Participants who said that they were not sure, who misidentified the feedback provided, or who indicated that the feedback was false were excluded from the study. To decipher this, all responses provided by participants were independently rated by two of the investigators. Any disagreements were resolved through discussion, and when necessary, a collaborator on the project was asked to weigh in. Kappa's (Cohen, 1960) agreement between raters was .84, indicating high agreement between coders (e.g., McHugh, 2012).[4] Second, when participants were provided the compatibility feedback, the amount of time they viewed the information was timed. Those who had a time of 10 seconds or less would not have had enough time to read the feedback and were excluded from the study.[5] Third, participants were asked to rate their sexual compatibility with their partner post-manipulation (e.g., "My partner and I are sexually compatible") on a 7-point scale (1 = *do not agree at all*, 7 = *agree completely*; M =

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[4] Cohen (1960) suggested the Kappa result be interpreted as follows: values < 0 as indicating no agreement and 0.01-0.20 as none to slight, 0.21-0.40 as fair, 0.41- 0.60 as moderate, 0.61-0.80 as substantial, and 0.81- 1.00 as almost perfect agreement.

[5] The exclusion criteria were pre-registered prior to collecting data and were established based on the pilot study (see the OSF for more information)

5.40, $SD = 1.65$). This allowed us to assess whether the manipulation was effective, but it was not used to exclude participants.

     Suspicion checks. After completing all other measures, participants were asked two open ended questions to gauge their suspicion (e.g., "Do you have any thoughts about what we might be looking for in this study?"; "Do you have any thoughts you'd like to share about the study?"). Participants who indicated that they were provided false feedback or similar responses indicating suspicion were excluded from analyses. To decide this, all responses provided by participants regarding their suspicion were independently rated by two of the investigators, as was done with the sexual ideal manipulation, with Kappa's (Cohen, 1960) agreement between raters (.63) once again indicating substantial agreement between coders (e.g., McHugh, 2012).

     Outcome measures.

     Sexual satisfaction. A single item (e.g., "I feel satisfied with our sexual relationship") was used to assess sexual satisfaction. Possible responses were on a 7-point scale (1 = *do not agree at all*, 7 = *agree completely*; $M = 5.53$, $SD = 1.39$).

     Relationship satisfaction. A single item (e.g., "I feel satisfied with our romantic relationship") was used to assess relationship satisfaction. Possible responses were on a 7-point scale (1 = *do not agree at all*, 7 = *agree completely*; $M = 6.06$, $SD = 1.18$).

     Commitment. A single item (e.g., "I am committed to maintaining my relationship with my partner") was used to assess commitment among couples. Possible responses were on a 7-point scale (1 = *do not agree at all*, 7 = *agree completely*; $M = 6.57$, $SD = 0.90$).

     Analytic plan.

     To assess the effectiveness of the perceived partner sexual communal strength manipulation, reports of difficulty of the task and reports of perceived partner sexual communal

strength at the conclusion of the study were assessed using a between subjects ANOVA in which

the perceived partner sexual communal strength experimental condition (high perceived partner

sexual communal strength versus low perceived partner sexual communal strength versus

control) was the predictor, and the outcome measures included the difficulty rating and the

perceived partner sexual responsiveness measure at the conclusion of the study (assessed

separately). To assess the effectiveness of the sexual ideal compatibility manipulation, reports of

perceived unmet sexual ideals at the conclusion of the study were assessed using a between

subject ANOVA wherein the sexual compatibility experimental condition (met versus unmet

sexual ideals) was the predictor, and the outcome measure consisted of participants self-reported

unmet sexual ideals at the conclusion of the study.

To assess our primary hypothesis, we examined whether reports of sexual satisfaction

and relationship quality significantly differed by the experimental conditions. More specifically,

we conducted 3 (perceptions of a partner as high in sexual responsiveness versus low versus

control) by 2 (met versus unmet sexual ideals) between-subjects ANOVAs wherein experimental

conditions and the interaction between the experimental conditions were the independent

variables, and the outcome measures consisted of sexual satisfaction, relationship satisfaction,

and commitment, tested in separate models. As with the previous studies, in exploratory analyses

we further assessed whether gender affected the manipulations' impact on sexual and

relationship quality. The analytic plan and the data and syntax for these analyses can be found on

the OSF.

Results

Manipulation checks. We began by examining the manipulation checks for the

perceived sexual communal strength manipulation. A main effect for the difficulty of the task

condition emerged, $F(616) = 51.32$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .14$. In the perceived partner sexual

communal strength condition, those in the low perceived partner sexual communal strength

condition ($M = 4.33$, $SE = 0.14$) perceived the recall task as more difficult than those in the high

partner perceived sexual responsiveness condition ($M = 2.90$, $SE = 0.14$; $t(616) = 7.26$, $p < .001$,

95% CI [0.96, 1.90]) or the control condition ($M = 2.46$, $SE = 0.13$; $t(616) = 9.73$, $p < .001$, 95%

CI [1.41, 2.33]). Additionally, across the perceived partner sexual communal strength conditions,

people differed in their perceptions of their partner's sexual communal strength, $F(617) = 3.26$, p

$= .039$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$. That is, people in the high perceived partner sexual responsiveness condition

($M = 5.64$, $SE = 0.11$) reported that their partner was higher in sexual communal strength post-

manipulation compared to those in the low partner sexual communal strength condition ($M =$

5.25, $SE = 0.11$, $t(617) = 2.47$, $p = .043$, 95% CI [.01, .77]), but did not significantly differ from

those in the control condition ($M = 5.35$, $SE = 11$; $p = .188$).

Additionally, across the unmet sexual ideals conditions, people differed in their

perceptions of their sexual compatibility post-manipulation, $F(617) = 77.96$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .11$.

Those who were told that their sexual ideals were unmet by their partner ($M = 4.82$, $SE = 0.09$)

reporter lower sexually compatibility with their partner (post-manipulation) than those who were

told that their sexual ideals were met by their partner ($M = 5.93$, $SE = 0.09$; $t(617) = -8.83$, $p <$

.001, 95% CI [-1.35, -0.86]).

Effects of unmet ideals and perceived partner sexual communal strength on sexual

and relationship quality. Correlations between all variables are in Table 10 and descriptive

statistics for all comparisons reported below can be found in Table 11. Results of the ANOVAs

showed that across the unmet sexual ideals conditions people differed in their reports of sexual

satisfaction ($F(617) = 12.49$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$), relationship satisfaction ($F(617) = 11.80$, $p =$

.001, $\eta_p^2 = .02$), and commitment ($F(617) = 7.34$, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$) post-manipulation. Those

who were told that their sexual ideals were unmet by their partner reported lower sexual and

relationship quality (post-manipulation) than those who were told that their sexual ideals were

met by their partner (sexual satisfaction, $t(617) = -3.52$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [-.61, -.17];

relationship satisfaction, $t(617) = -3.45$, $p = .001$, 95% CI [-.50, -.14]; and commitment, $t(617) =$

-2.72, $p = .007$, 95% CI [-.34, -.54]).

Additionally, across the perceived partner sexual communal strength conditions reports

differed for sexual satisfaction ($F(617) = 5.01$, $p = .007$, $\eta_p^2 = .02$) and relationship satisfaction

($F(617) = 7.98$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .03$) post-manipulation. That is, people in the high perceived

partner sexual communal strength condition reported higher sexual and relationship satisfaction

post-manipulation, compared to those in the low partner sexual communal strength condition

(sexual satisfaction, $t(617) = 2.99$, $p = .009$, 95% CI [.08, .74]; relationship satisfaction, $t(617) =$

3.86, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.17, .73]), and compared to the control condition (sexual satisfaction,

$t(617) = 2.47$, $p = .042$, 95% CI [.01, .66]; relationship satisfaction, $t(617) = 2.83$, $p = .014$, 95%

CI [.05, .60]). However, those in the low partner sexual communal strength condition did not

differ from those in the control condition for sexual ($p = 1.00$) or relationship ($p = .675$)

satisfaction. Furthermore, there was no main effect of perceived partner sexual communal

strength for commitment (all $ps = 1.00$).

The buffering effect of perceived partner sexual communal strength. Consistent with

our pre-registered predictions, the main effects were qualified by a sexual ideals (met versus

unmet) by perceived partner sexual communal strength (low perceived sexual communal

strength versus high perceived partner sexual communal strength versus control) interaction for

sexual ($F(617) = 3.38$, $p = .035$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, see Figure 4A) and relationship satisfaction ($F(617) =$

3.35, $p = .036$, $\eta_p^2 = .01$, see Figure 4B). However, there was no significant interaction for

commitment ($p = .461$). For participants who were told that their partner meets their sexual

ideals, sexual and relationship satisfaction did not differ based on perceived partner sexual

communal strength (high, low, control; all $p > .100$). However, among participants who were

told they have unmet sexual ideals, sexual and relationship satisfaction was significantly higher

in the high perceived partner sexual communal strength condition compared to the control

condition (sexual satisfaction: $t(617) = 3.47$, $p = .002$, 95% CI [.21, 1.14]; relationship

satisfaction: $t(617) = 3.27$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [.14, .93]) and the low perceived partner sexual

communal strength condition (sexual satisfaction: $t(617) = 3.28$, $p = .003$, 95% CI [.19, 1.13];

relationship satisfaction: $t(617) = 4.44$, $p < .001$, 95% CI [.34, 1.14]). Put another way, people

who perceived their partner as high in sexual communal strength reported the same levels of

sexual and relationship satisfaction when they were told they had unmet sexual ideals as when

their sexual ideals were met (sexual satisfaction, $p = .981$; relationship satisfaction, $p = .932$).

Providing evidence for generalizability of the findings. We further sought to explore

whether the effects of the manipulations on sexual and relationship quality were influenced by

gender through conducting an ANCOVA with gender added to the model. All effects reported

above held when controlling for gender.

Discussion

In this study, we found that those who were told that their sexual ideals were unmet by

their partner reported lower sexual and relationship quality (post-manipulation) than those who

were told that their sexual ideals were met by their partner. We also found that those who were

primed to perceive their partner as more responsive to their sexual needs reported greater sexual

and relationship quality (post-manipulation) than those who were led to believe their partner was

low in sexual communal strength and to a control condition. This study provides experimental

support for the buffering effect of a partner's sexual communal strength. That is, people who

perceived their partner as high in sexual communal strength reported the same levels of sexual

and relationship satisfaction when they were told they had unmet sexual ideals as when their

sexual ideals were met. This pattern of results provided evidence for the buffering effect of

having a sexually communal partner on the lower satisfaction associated with unmet sexual

ideals. However, in contrast to our predictions, we did not find support significant effects for

commitment.

General Discussion

Across six studies—using cross-sectional, daily diary, dyadic, and experimental

methods—we demonstrated that unmet sexual ideals are associated with both partner's lower

sexual and relationship quality. We further assessed whether sexual communal strength mitigated

these associations and found that having a partner who is high in sexual communal strength—

motivated to be responsive to their partner's sexual needs—can buffer against the negative

associations between unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality. Across the studies,

the results were largely consistent across gender (examined in Studies 1-5) and could not be

accounted for by sexual frequency (examined in Studies 3-4) or sexual desire (examined in Study

4).

Applying the Ideal Standards Model to Sexuality

We found consistent evidence that when individuals reported that their partner did not

meet their sexual ideals or were made to believe they had unmet sexual ideals, they reported

poorer sexual and relationship quality. This is in line with the Ideal Standards Model (Campbell

et al., 2013; Campbell et al., 2001; Campbell, et al., 2016; Csajbók & Berkics, 2017; Fletcher et

al., 2000; Overall et al., 2006), as well as interdependence theory (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993) and self-discrepancy theory (Higgins, 1987; Higgins et al., 1985), which would posit that relationships should be more satisfying and likely to endure when a romantic partner meets one's ideals. The current study also extends previous findings by demonstrating that individuals hold ideal preferences for their sexual relationship specifically, and their perceptions of having their sexual needs met versus unmet are associated with both sexual and relationship quality in general, in the moment, and over time.

There are several theoretical and methodological advantages to extending the ideal standards model to the domain of sexuality. The current research provides novel insight into what encompasses people's sexual ideals and indicates that sexual ideals can include a variety of preferences and partner attributes. In fact, the array of ideals held for a sexual partner contrasts and extends previous research on sexual discrepancies that has largely focused on differences in specific domains of sexual experiences (e.g., desired frequency of sex, levels of sexual desire, and specific sexual acts that are commonly engaged in; Davies, Katz, & Jackson, 1999; Dworkin & O'Sullivan, 2005; Mark, 2012; Santilla et al., 2007). As such, examining individuals' sexual ideals more broadly, rather than limiting the focus on sexual desire or aspects of sexual experiences specifically, may provide a more comprehensive understanding of sexual need fulfillment.

Beyond extending our understanding of sexual ideals, this current research provides insights into who is more likely to successfully navigate unmet sexual ideals. Indeed, a growing body of research has examined the cognitive tactics that individuals use to sustain their relationships when aspects of their partner are less than ideal, but this past work has focused on individual rather than dyadic strategies. For example, individuals frequently reframe their

expectations to more closely fit with the reality of their partner (e.g., Fletcher et al., 2000), perceive their partner to more closely resemble their ideal than they actually do (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996), mitigate negative partner qualities by associating unfavorable attributes with more virtuous traits (e.g., free-spirited as opposed to unreliable; Murray & Holmes, 1999), or try to change their partner to meet their ideals (Overall et al., 2006). However, attempts to change one's partner to match their ideals are often unsuccessful (see Hira & Overall, 2011) and are only able to produce small perceived partner improvements, with greater attempts to change one's partner actually reducing how closely the partner was perceived to match ideal standards, which, in turn, fed into more negative relationship evaluations (Overall et al., 2006). As such, this is one of the first studies to show that the negative consequences of unmet (sexual) ideals can be attenuated (i.e., reduced in significance), and in some cases buffered entirely (i.e., reduced to non-significance) through a partner's motivation to be responsive. Our work suggests that aiming to have all ideals met through regulation of one's own ideals, or attempts to change their partners to meet their ideals, may not be the only solution to mitigating the consequences of unmet ideals—rather, a partner's sexual communal strength (Studies 2-4) and one's perception of their partner's sexual communal strength (Study 5) can help people maintain sexual and relationship quality in the face of unmet sexual ideals. It is possible that the findings from the current research could be extended to test whether having a responsive partner more generally might buffer against unmet ideals in other relationship domains.

Extending Theories of Sexual Communal Motivation

Across the studies we found that having a partner who is responsive to one's sexual needs (i.e., high in sexual communal strength) can help individuals maintain sexual satisfaction and relationship quality even in the face of unmet sexual ideals. This finding is consistent with

previous research that suggests that on days when partners have different sexual interests, people who are more (as opposed to less) sexually communal are able to maintain satisfaction and have partners who are more satisfied as well (Day et al., 2015; Kogan et al., 2010; Muise & Impett, 2015). Our research suggests that although people with sexually communal partners still experience unmet sexual ideals, they may be better able to navigate these situations in ways that maintain both partners' satisfaction with their sex lives and relationships, compared to people who have partners who are less sexually communal. Based on past work, it is likely that communal people are more focused on the maintenance of the relationship as opposed to meeting their own needs (Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005; Kogan et al., 2010), and may approach their sexual experiences with their partner differently than people who are less communal. For example, highly communal people tend to focus on the positive aspects of their sexual experiences (Impett, Muise, & Harasymchuk, 2018), provide care to enhance their partner's welfare and not for their own benefit (Canevello & Crocker, 2010), are understanding and caring when their partner is not in the mood for sex—even if their own desire is high (Kim et al., 2018), and believe that sexual relationships take work and effort to thrive (Muise & Impett, 2016). One avenue for future research is to test the mechanisms that account for the buffering effect of a partner's sexual communal strength on the association between unmet sexual ideals and lower satisfaction.

In contrast to our predictions, results for the buffering effect of a person's own sexual communal strength were mixed and inconsistent across the studies. This is unexpected given that previous research has documented consistent benefits of being sexually communal, such that individuals who are more sexually communal maintain higher sexual satisfaction, sexual desire, relationship satisfaction, and commitment, even at times when couples report different sexual

interests (for a review, see Muise & Impett, 2015). One explanation for this finding is that communal people might be more focused on being responsive to their partner's sexual preferences, and this may not always buffer their own unmet ideals, or it may even be at the cost of meeting their own ideals. It is also possible that the role of one's own sexual communal strength in buffering effects is contingent on other factors. For example, it may depend on the degree to which a partner is sexually communal in response. In the current study correlations between partners' levels of sexual communal strength were rather low (Study 2, $r = .34$, $p < .001$) or not significantly associated (Study 3, $r = .01$; Study 4, $r = -.02$), so individuals who are responsive to their partner's sexual needs but do not receive the same responsiveness in return may perceive their efforts to be exploitive (e.g., see Mills & Clark, 1986). Another possibility is that a person's own sexual communal strength only buffers the detriments of unmet ideals when they communicate their sexual needs to their partner. Theoretically, people higher in sexual communal strength should also be more apt to communicate their own sexual ideals to their partner (Muise & Impett, 2016). Although this has not been tested empirically, in a qualitative study people reported that one way they meet their partner's sexual needs is by communicating with their partner about their sexual likes and dislikes, and ensuring mutuality such that both partners' needs are acknowledged and met in the relationship (Muise & Impett, 2015). Additionally, people who communicate more with their partner about their sexual ideals and whose partners are responsive to their sexual needs in return, may promote more changes in their partner's sexual behavior to better meet their ideals (i.e., sexual transformations; Burke & Young, 2012) or for their partner to favor their preferences (i.e., sexual compliance; Impett & Peplau, 2003; Katz & Tirone, 2009).

Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

The current research suggests that unmet sexual ideals are common and can be detrimental to relationships. Despite the prevalence and negative associations between unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality, interventions aimed at managing sexual incompatibilities, or incompatibilities in general, are scarce (see Walton, 2014 for a review). The current research provides initial evidence that having a sexually communal partner might help protect against the detriments of unmet sexual ideals. Furthermore, this work provides initial evidence that perceptions of a partner's sexual communal strength can be manipulated—and even enhanced—through asking people to reflect on recent instances in which their partner was attuned to and motivated to meet their sexual needs. In doing so, people were able to maintain sexual and relationship quality despite perceptions of unmet sexual ideals. Because sexual differences between partners are common (Miller et al., 2003) and among the most difficult types of conflicts to successfully resolve (Sanford, 2003), the findings could have implications for couples who are coping with differing sexual interests, and for clinicians working with these couples. Indeed, based on this research, it seems possible to enhance people's perceptions of their partner's responsiveness by having them focus on the ways in which their partner is attentive and responsive to their needs. Given the current and past research findings suggesting that a communal approach to a sexual relationship is associated with greater sexual and relationship quality, even for those with unmet sexual ideals, future work could consider whether it is possible to enhance people's endorsement of sexual communal norms, and if doing so would be beneficial, especially for people with unmet sexual ideals. Future work can also consider the extent to which people detect changes in their partner's sexual communal strength and whether a partner's sexual responsiveness has to be accurately detected by a person to have benefits for sexual and relationship satisfaction.

In this work we focused on perceptions of unmet sexual ideals, but it remains unknown whether correspondence between a person's sexual ideals and their partner's actual traits and preferences—that is, between a person's ratings of their sexual ideals and their partner's ratings of themselves on those same traits and preferences—influences sexual and relationship quality. Past approaches to comparing partner ideal-actual match has been limited by statistical biases, such as correlating difference scores with the outcome variable—which is not the ideal approach for testing matching effects (Cronbach & Furby, 1970; Edwards, 1994; Edwards, 2001; Edwards & Parry, 1993). The limitations of the ways in which ideal-actual matching has been tested in previous research have contributed to inconsistent findings in the effects of ideal-actual match in relationship ideals (for a review, see Eastwick et al., 2019). However, advances in statistical analyses for testing matching effects (e.g., response surface analysis; Humberg, Nestler, & Back, 2018; Nestler, Grimm, & Schönbrodt, 2015; Schönbrodt, 2016) can provide a powerful alternative approach that overcomes the limitations of past work and can enable researchers to test how and under what conditions ideal-actual match in sexual ideals are predictive of sexual and relationship quality among couples.

Additionally, the current studies focused on the associations of unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality among couples in long-term relationships, but it remains unknown whether ideal sexual preferences guide relationship formation processes, and whether ideal-actual match in the early stages of a relationship influences sexual and relationship quality over time. Future research could ask individuals about their ideal sexual preferences when they are single (i.e., not currently romantically attached) or upon entering a relationship, and could assess self-evaluations of a new romantic partner as well the partner's actual rating of themselves across the same traits and attributes over time (similar designs used by Campbell et al., 2016; Gerlach et al., 2019). This would

allow researchers to explore whether individuals enter new relationships with others who match their ideal preferences, and if the degree of match between one's ideal preferences and the qualities of their partner predicts relationship formation and maintenance over time. For example, research has shown that relationships develop and can be maintained more smoothly and successfully when individuals enter relationships with a partner who more closely matches their ideal preferences (Campbell et al., 2016; Gerlach et al., 2019), individuals are more satisfied in relationships when they perceive smaller discrepancies between their ideal standards and partner perceptions (Buyukcan-Tetik et al., 2017; Campbell, et al., 2001; Fletcher et al., 1999; Fletcher et al., 2000), and peoples' ideal standards for a romantic relationship can change to become more in line with their perception of their partner's over the first year together (Fletcher et al., 2000)—making these worthwhile avenues to extend to sexual ideals in future work.

Finally, this research examines unmet sexual ideals and sexual communal strength among a relatively homogenous sample of mostly mixed-sex couples, and thus these findings should only be generalized to a population similar to the sample itself: a primarily heterosexual, long-term, monogamous sample of couples. While most of these results generalize for men and women across the five studies, there may be interesting nuances that go undetected among primarily monogamous couples. In fact, one of the reasons sexual ideals might be so impactful for couples' sexual and relationship quality is because romantic relationships are often sexually exclusive (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2004). If a partner does not meet a person's sexual ideals, they may have fewer options for meeting their sexual needs than they would for other types of needs. Looking at the association between unmet sexual ideals and sexual and relationship quality in a sample of individuals in consensually non-monogamous relationships—relationships in which partners explicitly agree that extradyadic romantic or sexual relationships are permitted

(Conley, Ziegler, Moors, Matsick, & Valentine, 2013—would afford the opportunity to examine the relative importance of having ideals met by one partner, as opposed to distributing the fulfillment of ideals across multiple concurrent partners. As such, a worthwhile direction for future research would be to examine whether people in consensually non-monogamous relationships seek out and maintain other concurrent to meet their sexual ideals, and whether outsourcing the fulfillment of ideals across partners helps buffer against the detriments of unmet sexual ideals.

Concluding Remarks

Managing unmet sexual ideals can be a difficult task. In the current studies, we demonstrate that unmet sexual ideals are common among couples in long-term relationships and are negatively associated with evaluations of sexual and relationship quality for the individual and their partner. Unmet sexual ideals were associated with lower sexual and relationship quality when assessed in general, in daily life and over time, and in an experimental design when people were made to believe they had unmet versus met ideals. However, across studies we demonstrate that individuals who had partners who were responsive to their sexual needs (e.g., high in sexual communal strength) were able to maintain sexual and relationship quality in the face of unmet sexual ideals, whereas individuals with a partner low in sexual communal strength reported lower sexual and relationship quality when their sexual ideals were unmet by their partner. The. findings have implications for theories of ideal preference and communal motivation and for couples navigating unmet sexual ideals.

Supplemental Materials

The supplemental materials provide additional information about the Sexual Ideals Scale and about exploratory analyses conducted across the studies. The items for the scale were developed and examined by the current researchers prior to conducting the primary analyses included in this manuscript, and all exploratory hypotheses were tested after the primary analyses were examined. The hypotheses, methods, analytic approach, and results that pertain to the Sexual Ideals Scale and the exploratory analyses not included in the manuscript can be found in the Supplemental Materials.

Supplement 1. Study 1B: Exploratory Factor Analysis

Supplement 2. Study 1C: Confirmatory Analyses

Supplement 3. Exploratory Analyses Examining Unmet Sexual Ideals Across the Two Factors, Partner Interactions, and Gender

Supplement 4. Study 3: Partner Interactions

Supplement 5. Study 4: Partner Interactions

Supplement 6. Study 5: Pilot Study

Supplement 7. References for Supplemental Materials

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Tables

Table 1

Demographic Information for all Studies

	Study 1A	Study 1B	Study 2	Study 3	Study 4	Study 5
Age – Mean (SD)	32.03 (10.19)	33.63 (10.28)	45.80 (10.34)	30.70 (8.96)	32.63 (10.17)	34.80 (15.19)
Gender						
Male	94 (46.4%)	428 (46.7%)	207 (50%)	118 (50%)	115 (47.5%)	206 (33.3%)
Female	108 (53.2%)	445 (48.6%)	207 (50%)	118 (50%)	124 (51.2%)	408 (66.0%)
Other/Did not specify	1 (0.50%)	4 (0.50%)			2 (1.3%)	4 (0.70%)
Race						
White/Caucasian	135 (66.5%)	594 (64.8%)	350 (82.9%)	172 (72.9%)	158 (65.6%)	560 (90.6%)
Asian	34 (16.3%)	145 (15.8%)	9 (2.1%)	40 (16.9%)	38 (15.7%)	22 (3.4%)
Black	18 (8.9%)	81 (8.8%)	28 (6.6%)	5 (2.1%)	11 (4.5%)	10 (1.6%)
Hispanic	10 (4.9%)	67 (7.3%)	19 (4.5%)	13 (5.5%)	10 (4.1%)	6 (1.0%)
American Indian	1 (0.5%)	22 (2.4%)	2 (0.5%)	4 (1.7%)	-	1 (0.2%)
Bi-racial	-	-	-	-	14 (5.8%)	16 (2.6%)
Other	6 (3.0%)		6 (1.4%)	6 (2.5%)	10 (4.1%)	4 (0.6%)
Sexual Orientation						
Heterosexual	160 (78.8%)	735 (80.2%)	414 (100%)	209 (88.6%)	197 (81.4%)	535 (86.6%)
Lesbian/Gay	15 (7.4%)	45 (4.9%)	-	-	8 (3.3%)	17 (1.8%)
Bisexual	22 (10.8%)	82 (9.0%)	-	25 (10.6%)	22 (9.1%)	50 (8.1%)
Other	6 (3.0%)	15 (1.6%)	-	2 (0.8%)	15 (6.2%)	5 (0.8%)
Relationship Status						
Single	56 (27.6%)	399 (43.5%)	-	-	-	-
Dating	64 (24.2%)	177 (19.3)	26 (6.2%)	98 (41.5%)	107 (44.1%)	293 (47.4%)
Engaged	12 (5.9%)	34 (3.7%)	22 (5.2%)	27 (11.4%)	19 (7.9%)	37 (6.0%)
Married	69 (34.0%)	261 (28.5%)	366 (86.7%)	104 (44.1%)	113 (47.1%)	284 (46.0%)
Other	2 (0.80%)	6 (0.7%)	-	7 (3.0%)	3 (1.2%)	4 (0.6%)

Table 2

Frequency of Sexual Ideal Items Generated in Study 1A, Mean Importance Ratings from Study 1B, and Means Ratings for Unmet

Sexual Ideals in Study 2

Items	Study 1A	Study 1B	Study 2
1. Preferred gender	10 (4.93%)	2.42 (1.23)	1.23 (0.82)
2. Reciprocal (e.g., giving and receiving)	32 (15.76%)	2.10 (1.16)	2.10 (1.61)
3. Loving	33 (16.26%)	2.06 (1.25)	1.92 (1.52)
4. Feels safe	6 (2.96%)	2.06 (1.23)	1.49 (1.05)
5. Supportive	9 (4.43%)	2.05 (1.14)	1.96 (1.55)
6. Vaginal sex	50 (24.63%)	2.24 (1.10)	2.07 (1.69)
7. Monogamous	3 (1.48%)	1.66 (1.75)	1.55 (1.29)
8. In love	17 (8.37%)	1.38 (1.83)	1.61 (1.30)
9. Use protection (e.g., condoms)	4 (1.87%)	1.32 (1.93)	2.13 (1.83)
10. Oral sex	77 (37.93%)	1.31 (1.76)	2.61 (1.96)
11. Go on dates	4 (1.97%)	1.10 (1.64)	2.33 (1.75)
12. Sucking (non-genital)	2 (0.99%)	1.00 (1.76)	2.52 (1.85)
13. Nipple stimulation	6 (2.96%)	0.59 (1.88)	2.31 (1.66)
14. Family oriented	4 (1.97%)	0.52 (2.08)	1.72 (1.33)
15. Kinky	24 (11.82%)	0.44 (1.85)	2.73 (1.92)
16. Ejaculated on/in	9 (4.43%)	0.43 (1.90)	2.31 (1.88)
17. Dirty talk	16 (7.88%)	0.22 (1.88)	2.79 (1.99)
18. Showering together	5 (2.46%)	0.21 (1.88)	2.52 (1.80)
19. Swallowing ejaculate	6 (2.96%)	-0.43 (2.01)	2.76 (2.16)
20. Spanking	9 (4.43%)	-0.55 (1.95)	2.84 (2.13)
21. Hair pulling	6 (2.96%)	-0.61 (2.03)	2.61 (2.14)
22. Preferred ethnicity	5 (2.46%)	-0.66 (2.08)	1.57 (1.25)
23. Time of the day	15 (7.39%)	-0.72 (1.94)	2.60 (1.76)

24. Preferred religion	3 (1.48%)	-0.84 (2.21))	2.03 (1.61)
25. Bondage	9 (4.43%)	-1.03 (1.97)	2.84 (2.26)
26. Tickling	2 (0.99%)	-1.11 (1.84)	2.70 (2.02)
27. Anal sex	29 (14.29%)	-1.11 (1.84)	2.81 (2.21)
28. Promiscuous	2 (0.99%)	-1.12 (1.96)	2.51 (2.07)
29. Preferred hair color	7 (3.45%)	-1.19 (1.88)	2.31 (1.74)
30. Choking	3 (1.48%)	-1.49 (1.89)	2.83 (2.38)

Note. Higher scores indicate greater frequency (Study 1A), importance (Studies 1B and 2), or unmet (Study 2) sexual ideals. The raw score and percent is presented for Study 1A and the mean and SD are presented for Studies 1B and 2.

Table 3

Correlations Among Focal Variables for Study 2

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Relationship Satisfaction	**.75*****				
2. Sexual Satisfaction	.81***	**.74*****			
3. Commitment	.73***	.63***	**.63*****		
4. Sexual Communal Strength	.42***	.43***	.47***	**.34*****	
5. Unmet Ideals	-.52***	-.48***	-.47***	-.30***	**.60*****

Note: ****p* < .001, ***p* < .01, **p* < .05. Correlations between partners are bolded on the diagonal, with actor's correlations below the diagonal.

Table 4

APIM Models with Extent Partner Meets Ideals and Sexual Communal Strength Predicting Relationship Quality in Study 2

	Relationship Satisfaction				Sexual Satisfaction				Commitment			
	Main Effects		Interaction		Main Effects		Interaction		Main Effects		Interaction	
	b	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*
Fixed Effects												
Intercept	7.44	.10***	7.61	.10***	5.94	.06***	6.11	0.07***	8.29	.07***	8.50	.06***
Actor (A) Unmet Sexual Ideals	-.77	.08***	-.58	.08***	-.47	.06***	-.27	0.06***	-.41	.06***	-.26	.06***
Partner (P) Unmet Sexual Ideals	-.37	.08***	-.16	.08*	-.29	.06***	-.10	.06	-.36	.06***	-.13	.06*
A Sexual Communal Strength	-	-	.53	.11***	-	-	.36	.08***	-	-	.44	.08***
P Sexual Communal Strength	-	-	.42	.11***	-	-	.48	.08***	-	-	.20	.08**
A Unmet Ideals x A Sexual Communal Strength	-	-	-.22	.12	-	-	-.07	.08	-	-	.22	.08**
A Unmet Ideals x P Sexual Communal Strength	-	-	.45	.23***	-	-	.33	.08***	-	-	.16	.08*
P Unmet Ideals x A Sexual Communal Strength	-	-	.46	.12***	-	-	.39	.08***	-	-	.41	.08***
P Unmet Ideals x P Sexual Communal Strength	-	-	-.25	.12*	-	-	-.13	.08	-	-	-.03	.08

Note: ****p* < .001, ***p* < .01, **p* < .05.

Table 5

Correlations Among Focal Variables for Study 3

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Relationship Satisfaction	**.55*****					
2. Sexual Satisfaction	.45***	**.48*****				
3. Commitment	.53***	.29***	**.38*****			
4. Sexual Communal Strength	.27***	.14	.23*	**.01**		
5. Sexual Frequency	.18***	.32***	.02	.17***	**.72*****	
6. Unmet Sexual Ideals	-.47***	-.61**	-.21**	-.05	-.17***	**.42*****

Note: ***p* < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05. Correlations between partners are bolded on the diagonal, with actor's correlations below the diagonal. Baseline reports of specific variables (sexual communal strength and sexual frequency) were included in correlations. All other variables were at the daily level. Daily variables were aggregates across the diary.

Table 6

APIM Models with Daily Unmet Sexual Ideals and Baseline Sexual Communal Strength Predicting Daily Relationship Quality in Study 3

	Relationship Satisfaction				Sexual Satisfaction				Commitment			
	Main Effects		Interaction		Main Effects		Interaction		Main Effects		Interaction	
	B	*SE*	*B*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*B*	*SE*
Fixed Effects												
Intercept	4.40	.05***	4.40	.05***	4.80	.05***	4.80	.07***	6.48	.05***	6.56	.06***
Actor (A) Unmet Sexual Ideals	-.08	.01***	-.08	.01***	-.64	.01***	-.64	.01***	-.06	.01***	-.06	.01***
Partner (P) Unmet Sexual Ideals	-.02	.01***	-.02	.01***	-.14	.01***	-.13	.01***	-.01	.01*	-.01	.01
A Sexual Communal Strength			.21	.07**	-	-	.18	.10	-	-	.27	.09**
P Sexual Communal Strength			.20	.07**	-	-	.17	.10	-	-	.18	.09*
A Unmet Ideals x A Sexual Communal Strength	-	-	.02	.01*			-.07	.02**			.02	.01
A Unmet Ideals x P Sexual Communal Strength	-	-	.04	.01***			.05	.02*			.03	.01*
P Unmet Ideals x A Sexual Communal Strength	-	-	.02	.01*			.05	.02*			.02	.01
P Unmet Ideals x P Sexual Communal Strength	-	-	.02	.01			-.06	.02**			.01	.01

*Note: ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05.*

Table 7

Correlations Among Focal Variables for Study 4

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Relationship Satisfaction	**.46***						
2. Sexual Satisfaction	.54***	**.53***					
3. Commitment	.65***	.37***	**.44***				
4. Sexual Communal Strength	.09***	.10***	.17***	**-.02**			
5. Sexual Frequency	.30***	.20**	.01	.07	**.13**[1]		
6. Sexual Desire	.25***	.14***	.09*	.40***	.37***	**.06**	
7. Unmet Sexual Ideals	-.46***	-.55***	-.32***	-.09***	-.32***	-.25***	**.44***

Note: ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$. Correlations between partners are bolded on the diagonal, with actor's correlations below the diagonal. Baseline reports of specific variables (sexual communal strength, sexual frequency, and sexual desire) were included in correlations. All other variables were at the daily level. Daily variables were aggregates across the diary. [1] = Marginal at $p = .051$.

Table 8

APIM Models with Daily Unmet Sexual Ideals and Baseline Sexual Communal Strength Predicting Daily Sexual and Relationship Quality

in Study 4

	Relationship Satisfaction				Sexual Satisfaction				Commitment			
	Main Effects		**Interaction**		**Main Effects**		**Interaction**		**Main Effects**		**Interaction**	
	b	*SE*	*B*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*
Fixed Effects												
Intercept	6.03	.05***	6.05	.05***	5.47	.09***	5.49	.09***	6.46	.05***	6.46	.06***
Actor (A) Unmet Sexual Ideals	-.21	.01***	-.21	.01***	-.27	.01***	-.25	.01***	-.10	.01***	-.10	.01***
Partner (P) Unmet Sexual Ideals	-.06	.01***	-.07	.01***	-.08	.01***	-.09	.01***	-.02	.01*	-.01	.01
A Sexual Communal Strength			.14	.08			.00	.15	-	-	.13	.09
P Sexual Communal Strength			.07	.08			-.05	.15	-	-	.09	.09
A Unmet Ideals x A Sexual Communal Strength			.01	.02			-.01	.02	-	-	.01	.01
A Unmet Ideals x P Sexual Communal Strength			-.02	.02			.08	.02***	-	-	-.01	.01
P Unmet Ideals x A Sexual Communal Strength			-.00	.02			.06	.02***	-	-	-.00	.01
P Unmet Ideals x P Sexual Communal Strength			.03	.02[1]			.03	.02	-	-	.00	.01

Note. ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05, [1] indicates p-value is marginal at *p* = .05-.06.

Table 9

APIM Models with Daily Unmet Sexual Ideals and Baseline Sexual Communal Strength Predicting Relationship Quality Three Months Later in Study 4

	Relationship Satisfaction				Sexual Satisfaction				Commitment			
	Main Effects		Interaction		Main Effects		Interaction		Main Effects		Interaction	
	B	*SE*	*B*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*	*b*	*SE*
Fixed Effects												
Intercept	5.89	.09***	5.94	.09***	5.79	.08***	5.85	.08***	6.56	.07***	6.55	.07***
Actor (A) Unmet Sexual Ideals	-.15	.05**	-.11	.01*	-.51	.07***	-.46	.07***	-.19	.04***	-.21	.04***
Partner (P) Unmet Sexual Ideals	-.42	.05***	-.39	.05***	-.18	.07**	-.18	.07**	-.06	.04	-.04	.04
Baseline Sexual Satisfaction	.01	.05	.01	.05	.17	.07*	.15	.06*	.04	.04	.02	.04
A Sexual Communal Strength			.12	.14			.25	.16	-	-	.34	.11
P Sexual Communal Strength			.18	.14			.10	.16	-	-	.004	.11
A Unmet Ideals x A Sexual Communal Strength			.17	.08*			.02	.11	-	-	.07	.07
A Unmet Ideals x P Sexual Communal Strength			.02	.07			.22	.10*	-	-	-.05	.06
P Unmet Ideals x A Sexual Communal Strength			-.0009	.07			.03	.09	-	-	-.04	.06
P Unmet Ideals x P Sexual Communal Strength			.01	.08			.20	.11[1]	-	-	.15	.07

Note: ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05., [1] indicates p-value is marginal at *p* = .05-.07.

Table 10

Correlations Among Focal Variables (Post Manipulation) for Study 5

	1	2	3	4	5
1. Relationship Satisfaction	-				
2. Sexual Satisfaction	.62***	-			
3. Commitment	.48***	.34***	-		
4. Sexual Communal Strength	.49***	.70***	.34***	-	
5. Perceived Compatibility	.52***	.68***	.42***	.72***	-

Note: ***$p < .001$, **$p < .01$, *$p < .05$. Post-manipulation reports of specific variables were included in correlations.

Table 11

Comparing Sexual and Relationship Quality across Sexual Communal Strength and Sexual Ideal Conditions in Study 5

Variables	High SCS		Low SCS			Control		
	M	SE	M	SE	t	M	SE	t
Unmet Sexual Ideals Condition								
1. Sexual Satisfaction	5.78	0.14	5.12	0.14	3.35**	5.10	0.14	3.47**
2. Relationship Satisfaction	6.33	0.12	5.59	0.12	4.44***	5.79	0.12	3.27**
3. Commitment	6.51	0.09	6.40	0.09	0.85	6.51	0.09	0.00
Met Sexual Ideals Condition								
1. Sexual Satisfaction	5.77	0.14	5.61	0.13	0.83	5.78	0.13	0.05
2. Relationship Satisfaction	6.31	0.12	6.15	0.11	0.99	6.20	0.11	0.69
3. Commitment	6.74	0.09	6.69	0.09	0.44	6.58	0.08	1.26

*Note: ***p < .001, **p < .01, *p < .05.*
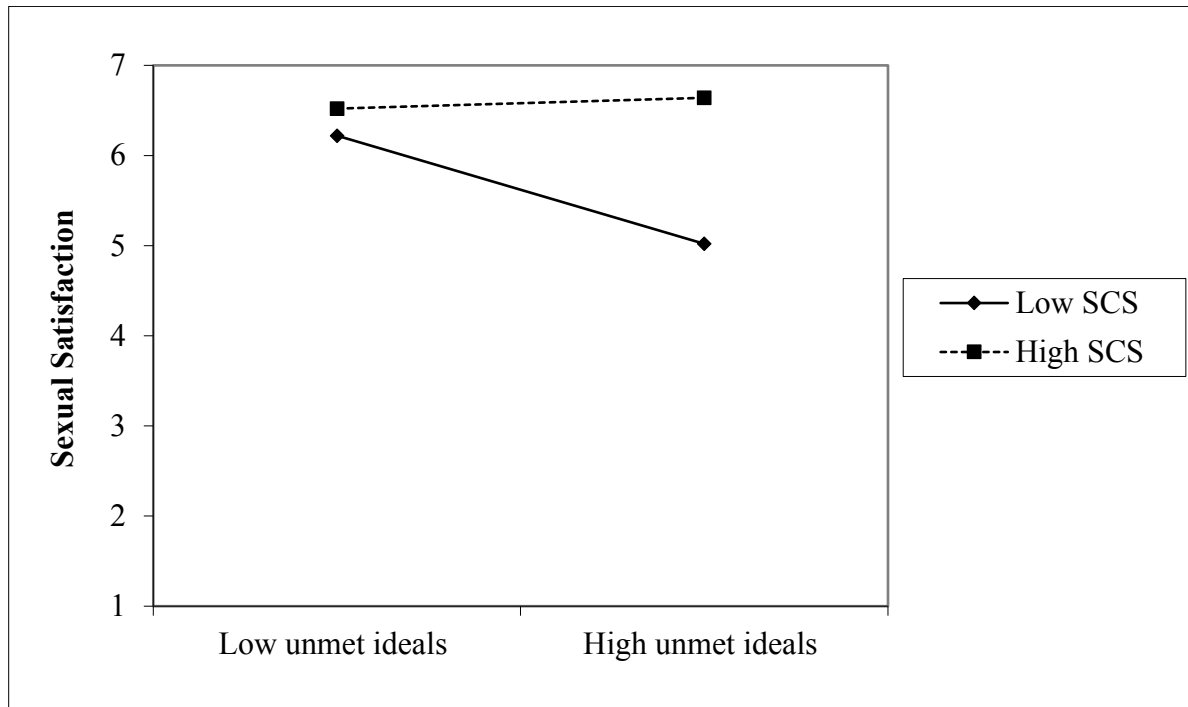
Fig. 1A. The interactive effect of actor's unmet sexual ideals and partner's sexual communal strength (SCS) on actor's sexual satisfaction (Study 2).
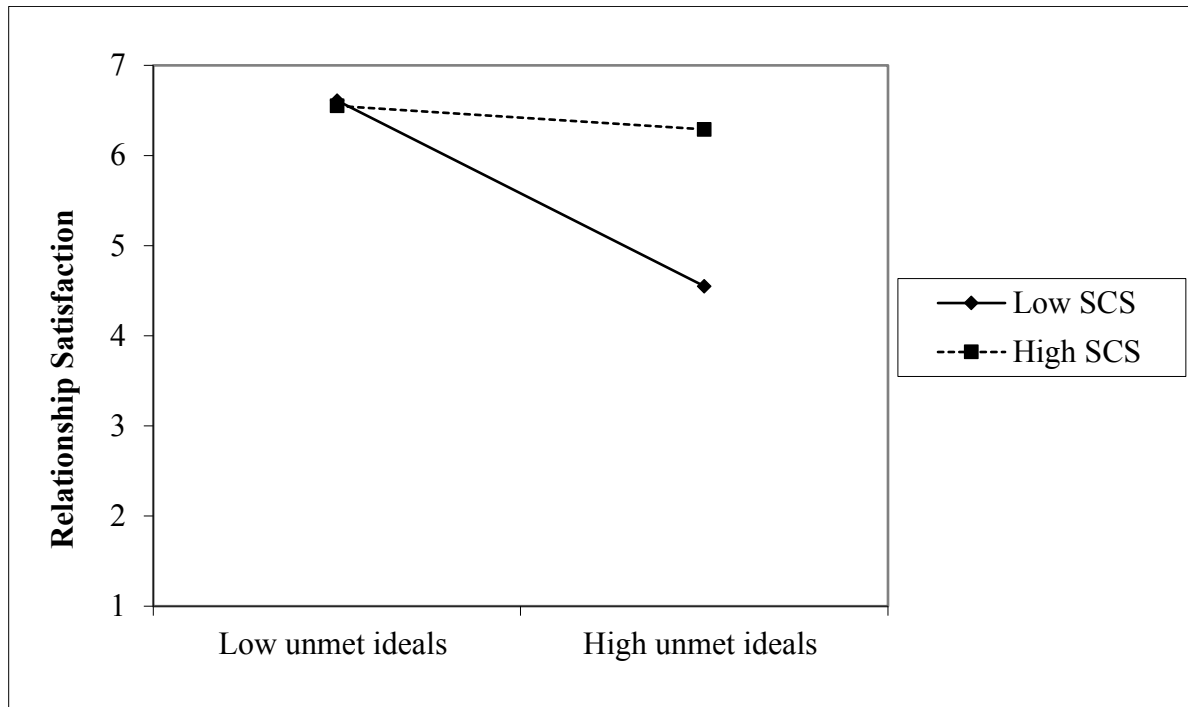
Fig. 1B. The interactive effect of actor's unmet sexual ideals and partner's sexual communal strength (SCS) on actor's relationship satisfaction (Study 2).
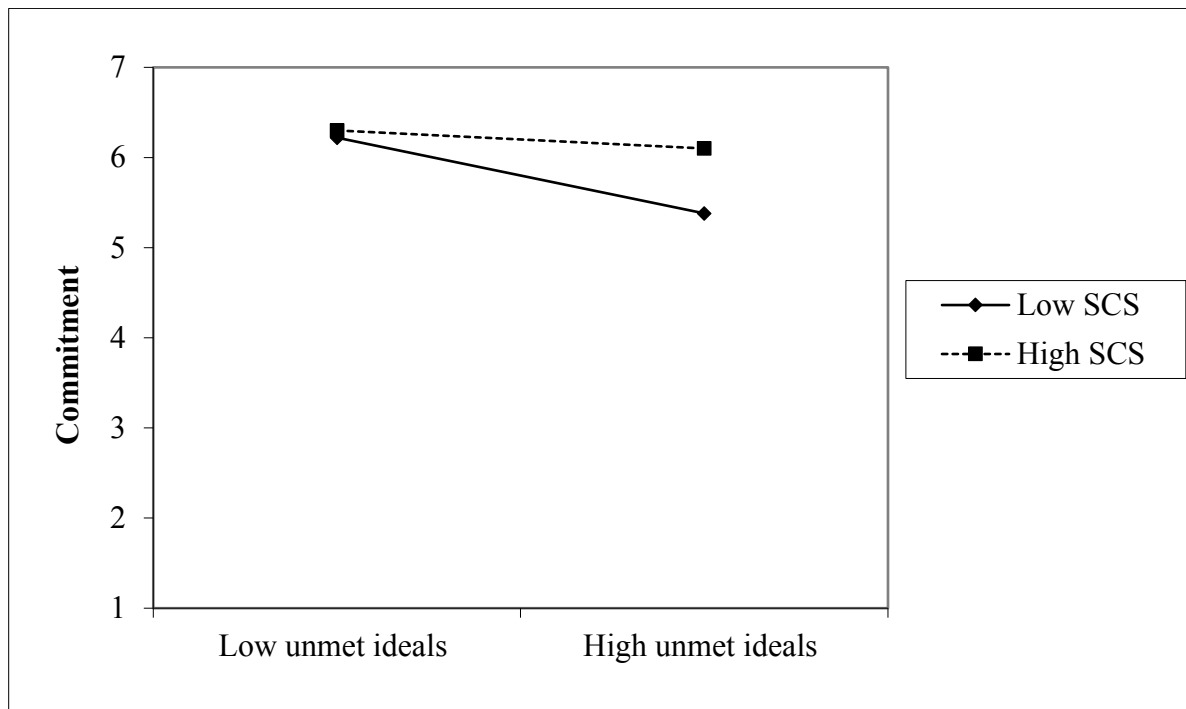
Fig. 1C. The interactive effect of actor's unmet sexual ideals and partner's sexual communal strength (SCS) on actor's commitment (Study 2).
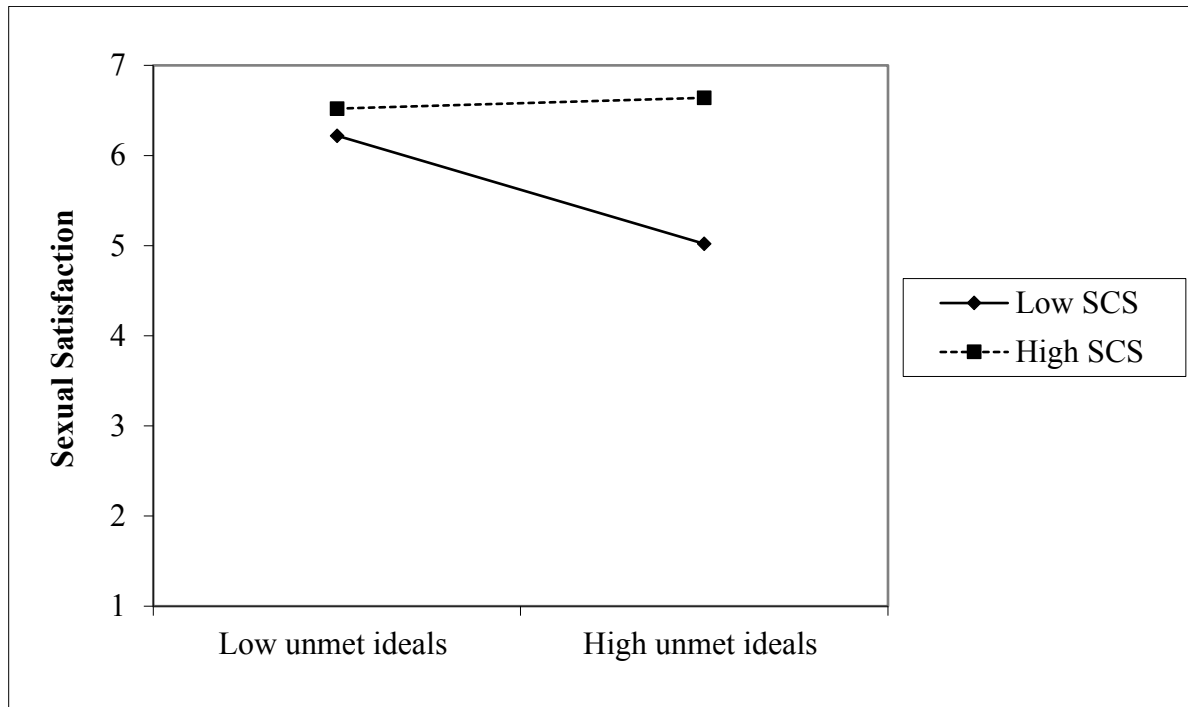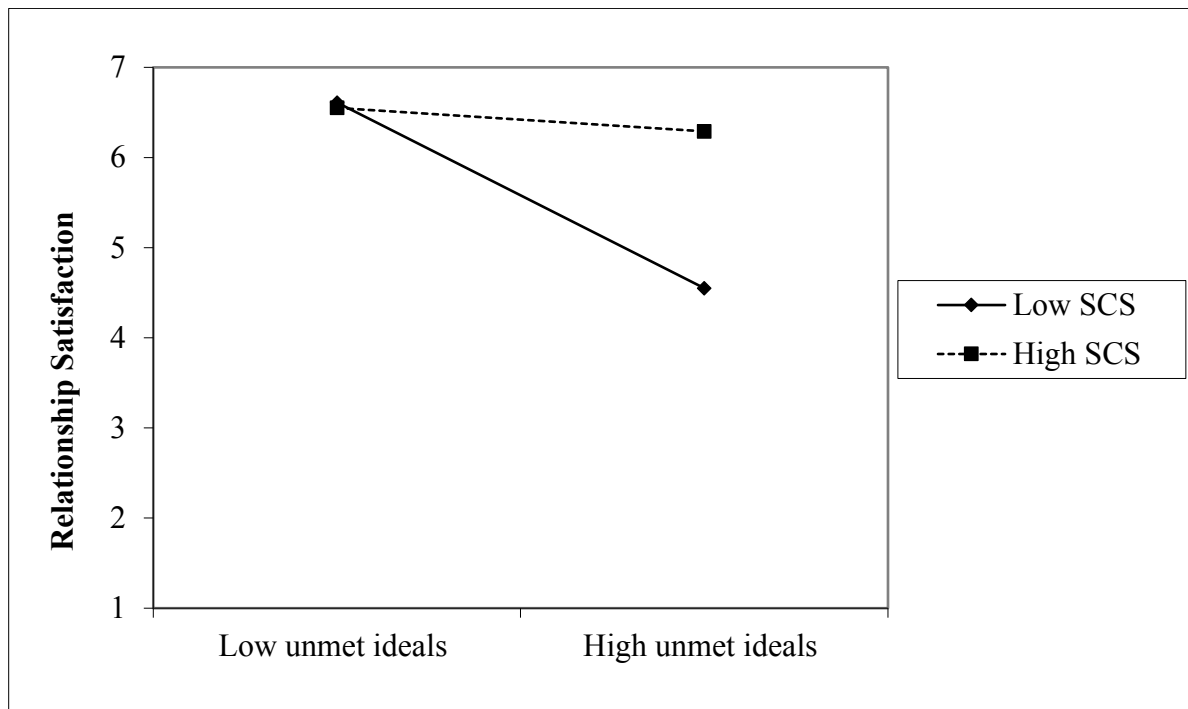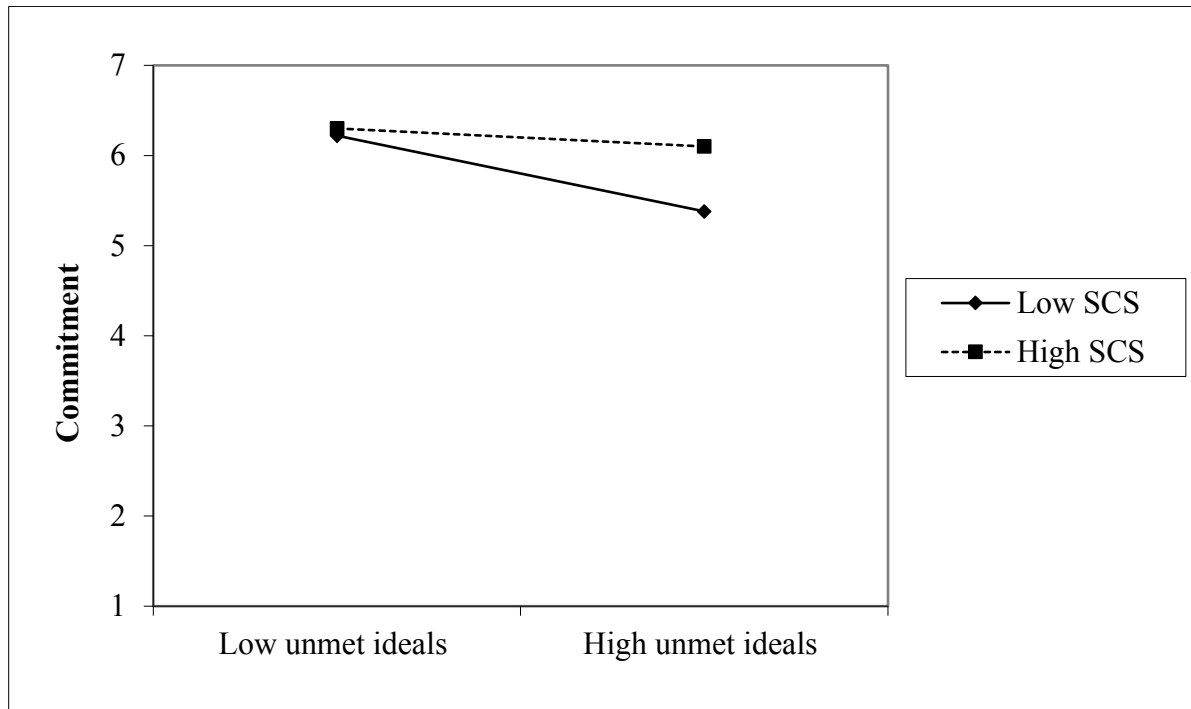
Fig. 2A. The interactive effect of actor's daily unmet sexual ideals and partner's sexual

communal strength (SCS) on actor's sexual satisfaction (Study 3).

Fig. 2B. The interactive effect of actor's daily unmet sexual ideals and partner's sexual communal strength (SCS) on actor's relationship satisfaction (Study 3).

Fig. 2C. The interactive effect of actor's daily unmet sexual ideals and partner's sexual communal strength (SCS) on actor's commitment (Study 3).
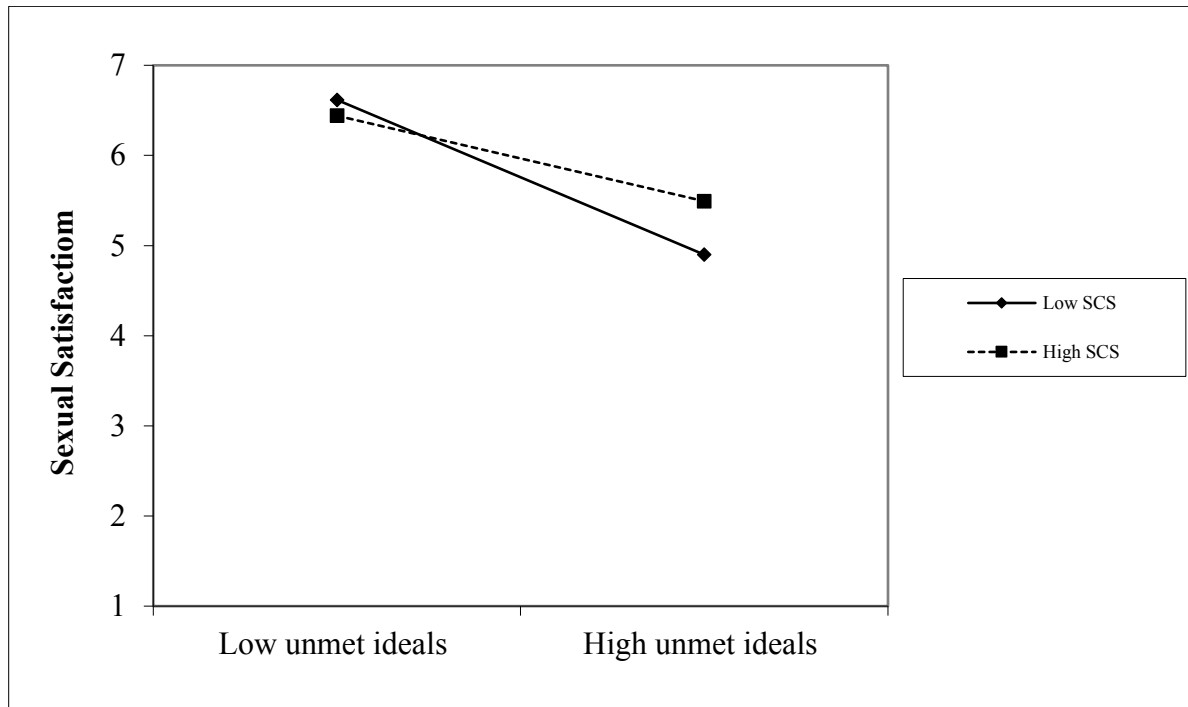
Fig. 3. The interactive effect of actor's daily unmet sexual ideals and partner's baseline sexual

communal strength (SCS) on actor's sexual satisfaction 3-months later (Study 4).
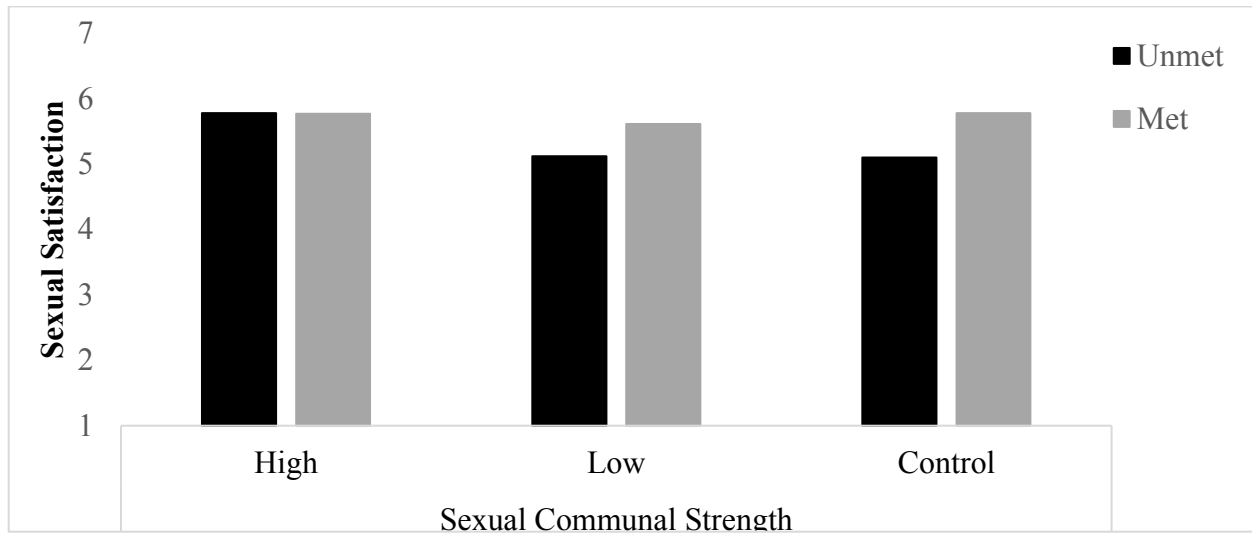
Fig. 4A. Mean Ratings Across Sexual Communal Strength and Sexual Ideal Conditions for

Sexual Satisfaction (Study 5).