**Expectations and beliefs regarding sex in relationships**

**Jessica A. Maxwell  
University of Auckland**

Individuals’ sex lives can play a large role in their overall relationship happiness. Couples who have more fulfilling sex lives tend to have more fulfilling romantic relationships, and vice versa. But there are wide individual differences in the value individuals place on the sexual component of their romantic relationships, and their expectations for what a satisfying sex life will look like long term. Some such individual differences that affect beliefs and expectations about sex in romantic relationships are detailed below.

**Beliefs about casual sex**

Firstly, individuals differ in their beliefs as to whether sex should occur in the context of a committed relationship. Those with a more *unrestricted sociosexual orientation* feel more comfortable with sex outside of romantic relationships (such as in casual encounters), whereas those with a more *restricted sociosexual orientation* believe that sexual acts should be restricted to romantic relationship contexts. Those with unrestricted beliefs experience greater well-being on weeks when they engage in casual sex versus when they do not, whereas those with more restricted beliefs did not experience such well-being boosts from casual sex (Vrangalova, & Ong, 2014). Casual sex encounters take on different forms such as one-night stands and friends with benefits relationships, and individuals have clear norms and expectations as to what behaviors are appropriate in each (e.g., Wentland & Reissing, 2011). Yet individuals hold different expectations as to whether these casual encounters can turn into a more committed relationships, with women being more likely to endorse such expectations than men (Lehmiller, VanderDrift, & Kelly, 2011). Despite the emerging body of research on the role of beliefs and expectations in casual sex encounters, for the remainder of the entry we will focus on these concepts in romantic relationship contexts.

**Beliefs about the importance of sex**

People differ in the importance they ascribe to sex in romantic relationships, and this can have implications for their relationship satisfaction. The perceived importance of sex can be tied to particular sex acts: Women who believe penile-vaginal intercourse is more, relative to less, important to relationships report relationship satisfaction that is contingent on how often they experienced penile-vaginal intercourse over the past month. Likewise, for women who believe oral sex is important for relationships, their relationship satisfaction was a function of how often they received oral sex over the past month (Hicks, McNulty, Meltzer, & Olson, 2018).

**Beliefs about one’s sexual relationship**

Beyond the overall importance placed on sex in romantic relationships, people have beliefs and expectations regarding their sexual partners. On an encouraging note, many couples have positive beliefs about their sexual relationship. For instance, more relative to less committed individuals believe their sex life is better than that of others and are more confident their partner is their sexual ideal (de Jong & Reis, 2015). Positive beliefs about sex can have concrete advantages: Women who had the highest expectations for sexual satisfaction at the beginning of marriage reported greater increases in sexual satisfaction six months later, relative to those with more tempered expectations (McNulty & Fisher, 2008). In contrast, having negative expectations for sexual encounters is a hallmark of various forms of sexual dysfunction.

But can individuals maintain positive beliefs about their sexual partner when faced with the reality that sexual desire and passion tend to wane over the course of a long-term relationship? Individuals hold a variety of beliefs as to why passion may subside over time, and whether this is inevitable. Women attribute such declines in passion and desire to a variety of factors such as over-familiarity with a partner, de-sexualization of roles (i.e., the role of mother being incompatible with the role of lover), and how marriage can de-eroticize the relationship (Sims & Meana, 2010). Encouragingly, women report taking action to address when their sexual desires do not line up to their partner’s, such as by focusing on communication, making compromises, trying new things, flirting to get their partner in the mood, scheduling sex, etc. (Herbenick, Mullinax, & Mark, 2014).

**Lay Beliefs about improving your sex life**

The above strategies imply that some individuals have the implicit belief that they can take action to improve their sex life, known as a growth, incremental or malleable lay theory/mindset. Individuals’ *implicit or lay theories* about sexuality refer to their basic beliefs—that they often do not consciously articulate—regarding sex. Individuals’ lay beliefs can widely be grouped into the belief that aspects of one’s sex life are fixed, versus malleable (i.e. you can change them). There are now several scales that assess lay beliefs regarding different aspects of one’s sex life: attraction, desire, passion and satisfaction. These studies converge on the notion that, for the most part, malleable beliefs are more adaptive for sexual and relationship functioning. For example, believing that a satisfying sex life takes effort and work to maintain is associated with higher relationship and sexual satisfaction, even when sexual difficulties arise, or during difficult time periods such as the transition to parenthood (Maxwell et al., 2017). Whereas, believing aspects of your sex life are fixed or destined can negatively affect your sex life and relationship, particularly when one encounters sexual problems. Individuals with these fixed beliefs tend to allow sexual issues to detract from their evaluation of their relationship overall (e.g., Bohns, Scholer, & Rehman, 2015).

**Attributions**

Believing your sex life is unchangeable or fixed is related to research on attributions for sexual issues. Existing work suggests that making stable attributions for sexual problems—that is, attributing them to causes that cannot be controlled and are unlikely to change—is associated with poorer sexual outcomes. For example, when rating scenarios depicting post-partum sexual concerns, first-time mothers who believed the sexual issues were stable (causes were unlikely to change) were less sexually satisfied (Vannier, Adare, & Rosen, 2018). Likewise, undergraduate women experiencing sexual issues most often believed the cause of the issue were stable, an attribution that was associated with poorer sexual functioning (Stephenson & Meston, 2016). Coupled with the reviewed literature on lay theories, it seems evident that believing one has the ability to improve one’s sex life, and the agency to address any sexual difficulties, is paramount to sexual and relationship well-being.

**Attachment Style**

A consideration of beliefs and expectations in sexual relationships would be remiss without discussing one of the most well-researched individual difference in relationship expectations: attachment style (see reviews by Dewitte, 2012; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017). An individual’s attachment style refers to two independent core beliefs they hold: whether they expect others are trustworthy (low *attachment avoidance*) and whether they believe they are worthy of love (low *attachment anxiety*). These expectations carry over to the sexual domain. Secure individuals, who are low in attachment anxiety and avoidance are comfortable with sexuality. They communicate openly with their partner and are confident to try new things in the bedroom. Because they have positive beliefs about others and themselves they are not bogged down by concerns during sex, and are able to have positive, pleasurable sexual encounters.

Conversely, individuals high in attachment anxiety—who crave love and fear abandonment—use sex as a barometer for relationship quality, meaning they believe that the quality of their sex life is diagnostic of the quality of their relationship on the whole. They believe sex can give them the intimacy they crave and thus use sex as a means to seek closeness. Because they place a great deal of importance on sex—believing it reflects the state of their relationship—they are often plagued with concerns during sex, and ultimately experience poorer quality encounters. Yet, when they are able to have fulfilling sex, their overall relationship benefits.

Individuals high in attachment avoidance, who avoid closeness and value independence, downplay the role of affection in sex. For example, they are more comfortable with sex in casual contexts, are hypothetically willing to enter into open relationships, and have sexual fantasies devoid of intimacy. Rather than having sex to express love for a partner, they often have sex to avoid negative consequences (e.g., avoid a fight). Individuals high in attachment avoidance are not particularly sensitive to the quality or emotional components of the sex they have, but can benefit from more frequent sex. Taken together, individuals’ fundamental expectations of whether they can trust others and are worthy of love play a critical role in the way they construe and experience sex.

**Conclusion**

In sum, how individuals construe sex in the context of relationships can have widespread and critical implications both for their relationship, and sexual well-being. Those who believe sexual relationships are fixed and stable, and those high in attachment anxiety, are prone to lower satisfaction, in part because they allow their sexual relationship to dictate their overall relationship quality.

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