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The Effect of Marriage verses Cohabitation on Sexual Communication in Latino, African
American, and Caucasian Adults

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Abstract

This study focuses on the effect of communication on sexual relationship satisfaction when comparing cohabiting couples with married couples. Communication is an important part of relational and sexual satisfaction. Research was conducted using scholarly journal articles and quantitative data from questionnaires. Fifty-four questionnaires were completed by males and females that were at least forty years, married or cohabitating, and identified as Latino, African American, or Caucasian. The data from the questionnaires found that both heterosexual and homosexual couples in domestic partnerships had better sexual communication than those who were married. People from diverse backgrounds can relate to the data collected because marriage and sexual communication are relevant to people all over the world.

1. Introduction

Human beings are a group of complex individuals, but acquire the same basic needs in life.

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, all humans are genetically equipped with the need for physiological stability, safety, love, esteem and self-actualization. When it comes to relationships and humans, sexual intimacy is an important aspect to having a physiologically sound relationship. According to Heather Blunt, "sexual health is an important component to overall well-being and quality of life" (12). In order to achieve a highly-satisfied sexual relationship, good communication about one's own anticipated needs between both individuals is essential.

A majority of Americans will be married at one point in life. However, cohabitation is also on the rise and becoming a popular option. This is changing the way couples behave and communicate, affecting how well their needs are being met. Referencing Maslow's hierarchy of needs, specifically the physiological portion, we hope to discover a positive correlation between good communication regarding sexual wants and a successful relationship in middle-aged and older couples.

Using statistical analysis, the purpose of this research is to examine if sexual communication between both married individuals and cohabiting individuals affects one's general relationship satisfaction. According to Elizabeth Babin, ineffective communication can facilitate the development and maintenance of sexual dysfunction and can result in negative sexual and relational outcomes, thus reducing the motivation to engage in future sexual communication (271). Literary research suggests that the lack of communication regarding the topic of sex poses the potential of negative consequences within individual relationships. The objective of this study is to examine the ways in which communication plays an important role in determining how satisfied the individuals are in or out of a marriage. We hypothesize that couples who are married will have better communication than those who are in a domestic partnership, and thus get their needs met better and experience more general satisfaction with their relationship as a whole.

It is important to study sexual communication because these communications serve many functions in a relationship. The first major function serves to create sexual satisfaction and sexual well-being. That is, individuals who self-disclose more about their sexual likes and dislikes report greater sexual well-being (Byers 20). If the couple has positive experiences and achieves pleasure which leads to intimacy within this part of the relationship, it stands to reason that it betters the couple's outlook on their relationship in its entirety. Secondly, sexual communication serves to help individuals achieve personal and relational goals. Research shows that achievement of these goals leads to personal, sexual, and relational attainment (Hess & Coffelt 603). Our study helps to create a level of understanding that can be used within sex

therapy and marriage counseling in middle to older adulthood, specifically from the ages of 40 years old and upward. Our research findings may provide information that will help lead to longevity within relationships and ultimately increase understanding of the importance of sexual communication and its effects on relationships.

The first objective of this study, using empirical research, is to examine the effects of marriage versus cohabiting on sexual communication. The second objective of this study is to analyze the data gathered from the Sexual Satisfaction Survey in regard to marriage, cohabitation, communication, and other variables. The third objective is to identify the patterns and correlations between marriage and cohabitation.

2. Research Methods

The study is an example of exploratory research using the survey method. Specifically, by using a questionnaire, it was possible to identify the participants' gender, ethnicity, marital status, and the comfort level of each participant when communicating with their partner. The first portion of the questionnaire relates to the subjects' information that helped categorize them while not obtaining personal identifiers, allowing each respondent to remain anonymous. The next set of questions provided information about how couples feel within the relationships, if they are in love and how they rate their relationship in comparison to other couples. Also, participants were asked if the couple communicated specifically about sexual satisfaction, and the level of pleasure and the manner in which they communicate about the subject. The questions were answered based on a scale, one being very poor or low to five being very good or high. With this method,

an understanding is achieved of the individuals' feelings, their thoughts about their own communication skills, as well as sense of their partner's communication skills.

The questionnaire was given to fifty-four different individuals based on a select set of predetermined criteria to divide individuals into groups to compare information. The groups were divided into sections based on their gender; there were twenty-five males and twenty-nine females. The survey participants were asked to identify their ethnic group. There were twenty-six individuals who identified as Caucasian, seventeen who identified as African American, and eleven who identified as Hispanic/Latino. Finally, the participants were divided into two groups based on marital status; there were thirty-two married respondents and twenty-two in domestic partnerships. An additional criterion included the ages of the individual, which was forty years old or older. The criteria for the questionnaire were meant to provide a variety of data and information about older adults to gain a better understanding of how their sexual communication affects their relationship and to consider how this varies across different ethnicities, ages, and genders. The topic discussed is something applicable to people who live in a variety of different cultures since marriage and sexual communication are key factors in a high quality of life.

3. Literature Review

Middle to older adult populations have become a popular topic for researchers within the United States. Amelia Karraker and John DeLamater, from the Department of Sociology at the University of Wisconsin, have found that sexual expression and sexual communication are areas in need of attention (142). This topic is important to study because of the continuing population

shift; the baby boomer generation is beginning to age, thus creating a great increase in the amount of elderly individuals within this country.

3.1. Why It Is Important To Communicate Sexual Needs

Specifically, communication about sexual satisfaction is key in a marriage or domestic partnership. Babin researches relationships and the importance of the communication of needs, like sexual desires (270). Babin's research shows how relationships are more successful when both individuals are able to express their sexual desires to each other and express their needs (272). Hana Yoo has also researched the importance of strong communication—its impact on both partners' increased sexual satisfaction and their emotional intimacy (43). Intimacy is important in relationships because it shows the individuals how much love is in their relationship, which could also turn into sexual satisfaction. Communication allows the individuals to feel free to open up to their significant others about how they feel in their sexual relationship and what needs to happen in order to achieve more satisfaction. This research has shown how intimacy levels in relationships increased when communication skills were improved.

In recent studies, it has been found that relationships are more satisfying when partners have good communication skills. Whether it is an interpersonal relationship with a friend/partner or a relationship with a co-worker, the results seem to be similar all across the board that effective communication leads to greater satisfaction regardless of the marital status of that person. Communication plays a key role whether when working in groups or maintaining a healthy relationship with a spouse. It is shown that a working healthy relationship includes two people who have the desire to stay connected. This means that whenever one fails to communicate

effectively, it shows a lack of interest, and therefore, the partner will not believe the relationship to be of importance (Mitrofan 513-514). As a corollary, a lack of communication shows dissatisfaction experienced by individuals in the relationship. The types of dissatisfaction can include avoidance and withdrawal (Smith 1314-1325). On the other hand, couples that are open about expressing themselves and discussing various issues have a tendency to be highly satisfied rather than couples that are not expressive (Smith 1314-1325).

It seems confirmed from a variety of perspectives that successful communication with a partner is crucial to obtaining a satisfying relationship. Within the context of this literature review, it is important to define the word “communication” more clearly. Communication entails the exchange of thoughts, ideas and opinions in the form of speech or writing. The majority of couples are likely to express themselves in conversations that involve speech. This method is a more direct approach and possibly even more effective when dealing with a conflict.

The American Psychological Association explains the importance of keeping a relationship healthy and feeling new with years and years to come. They found that 40 percent of marriages end in divorce (Haight and Abrahamson, 1). The American Psychological Association provides examples of different ways to continue to maintain communicational satisfaction between partners. The findings of this article imply that healthy and open communication is more important to a successful relationship than commitment levels offered and personality traits shared between a pair and helps to overcome the frightening thought of divorce. The findings in this article demonstrate that dealing with conflict in a constructive way leads to higher satisfaction and relational happiness. It is more constructive to understand how a partner may feel, rather than tearing a partner down and fighting in a destructive way.

3.2 . When You Lack Communication

When trying to start and keep an intimate relationship with a significant other, communication is key and will lead to relationship satisfaction (Montesi, Gordon, and Heimberg 592). Without a good form of personal and constructive communication during the duration of a relationship, it can be more difficult to resist distress. The consequences of not communicating are lack of knowledge about one partner's likes and dislikes, and of one's own expectations concerning the relationship, including what one can bring to the relationship. When couples do not communicate, that can lead to misinterpreted information resulting from the non-verbal communication gestures presented by either partner. This lack of verbal communication can lead to a void in the relationship (Määttä and Uusiautti 37). The ability to converse without fear of rejection or the potential discomfort and awkwardness when discussing aspects of the relationship can lead to a greater reward and a deeper intimacy. When couples communicate openly about sexual satisfaction, an increased overall relationship and sexual satisfaction will be reported (Montesi, Gordon, and Heimberg 592). Research suggests that for a relationship to be satisfying, the couple must also obtain good and effective communication skills about topics unrelated to sex (Montesi, Gordon, and Heimberg 593).

3.3. Long Term Effects of Marriage and Cohabitation

It has been found that married couples who cohabited before marriage have lower levels of marital happiness and communication (James and Beattie 652). Shafer, Jensen, and Larson also found that married couples who cohabited before were more likely to get a divorce (213). However, over time it was found that the gap between cohabiters' and non-cohabiters' marital satisfaction vanished in a study by Spencer James (220). Past research has shown that most

cohabiters do not cohabit indefinitely, but for a season of life. A study by the National Center for Health Statistics found similar results matching the previously mentioned study (Baker and Elizabeth 393-4,404). It found that after twenty years of marriage, couples who were engaged and cohabiting versus couples who were not engaged while cohabiting were just as likely to still be married. Most would either get married or separate because they exhibited traits such as being younger in age, having no children and being less conventional. It is these factors that were often found to contribute to relationship instability. Present research has found this pattern to be changing as most married couples are cohabiting before marriage (Baker and Elizabeth 393-4,404).

3.4. Reasons Why People Marry or Cohabitate

Murrow and Shi used three different categories including precursor to marriage (couples who in place of marriage just cohabit), trial marriage (couples who live together to decide if marriage is right for them), and co-residential dating (couples who live together out of convenience and the next step in their relationship) (408). Their results suggest that cohabitation as a precursor to marriage has a positive effect on relationship quality. However, if the reason for cohabiting is viewed by the couple as the next step in their relationship, then there is no correlation with lower quality relationships and cohabiting (Murrow and Shi 408). Additionally, Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman's study is about how different reasons for cohabitation are correlated with well-being and the quality of relationships. The three reasons of cohabitation used as a scale in this study were: a) reasons for cohabitation related to a desire for more time together and greater intimacy; (b) reasons related to convenience; and (c) reasons related to a desire to test one's relationship. Couples who cohabit to spend more time together and for convenience are more likely to have a

positive quality of relationship and a sense of personal well-being. With couples who are living together to test their relationship, researchers found that this is related to insecurity as well as depression and anxiety (Rhoads, Stanley and Markman 236-237).

3.5. Human Behavioral Theory

According to Erik Erikson's theory of human development, each individual will experience eight levels of crisis that they must go through in order to attain the next level of development. Erikson labels stage six as intimacy versus isolation. It is in this stage that individuals who are generally in their young adult years will learn how to relate to others in an intimate relationship. If one does not participate in the relationship with a partner at this stage, he or she will be faced with the crisis of isolation (Zastrow and Ashman 314-315). This relates to marriage and cohabitation because in both instances there is a relationship in which each person involved experiences the ability to share emotions, empathy and a cohesive unit with their partner.

4. Findings

Our original predetermined hypothesis that older couples who were married would have better sexual communication was contradicted by our data. The survey distributed had numerous sections including: identifying information (e.g. gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, religion, and education) (see Table 1, 2); general relationship status; sexual communication; behavior; and quality of life. Our research examined the section identifying the participants' information, in particular, their marital status, and the section regarding sexual communication. Under the section of sexual communication, our twelve questions asked about sexual satisfaction. Each

participant read the questions and rated their answers on a one to seven scale, one indicating disagreement and seven indicating agreement.

When comparing the twelve questions focused on sexual communication between married participants with that of applicants who self-identified as being in a domestic partnership, the statistics acknowledged a consistent difference between marital and domestic partnerships (Figures 1-13). The study showed that participants who were in a domestic partnership showed significantly higher ratings compared to the married individuals. After separating the data into the twelve different questions based on sexual communication and analyzing all the numbers we collected, we concluded that our hypothesis did not tally with what our data found. We hypothesized that couples who are married will have better communication than those who are in a domestic partnership. According to the findings, out of fifty-four participants, twenty-two are in a domestic partnership and were found to have significantly better sexual communication in their relationships (Table 1).

5. Discussion

Every research study has its restrictions, and this study has several limitations. One such restriction is that the surveys were filled out in front of the researcher. Filling out personal and intimate questions may cause people to be embarrassed by their responses and to not report the whole truth. This is especially relevant for males who are expected to fulfill certain gender roles within sexual relationships. Confidentiality was explained to our participants very carefully and thoroughly but this will not completely make up for them not wanting to admit to others the negative aspects of their relationships due to the topic's intimate nature. This was not a simple

random sample because surveys were given to people whom we knew, which created more biased results. Thus our sample was rather limited and our results are not as generalizable.

Another limitation of the study is the disproportionate amount of ethnicities. There were only eleven Latinos in the study compared to the seventeen African Americans and twenty-six Caucasians, which could have contributed to the results found in the study. The more even the number of ethnicities, the less biased and more generalizable internationally the results can be. The last limitation is that we used a structured questionnaire to collect the data. There were no questions included in the survey to let the participants explain their answers in their own words; a semi-structured interview would have provided more insight. It is hard to capture decades of marriage in a structured survey. Further research should include more quantitative information to gather in-depth responses. This would provide explanations for why people feel the way they do and create greater insight into the history of relationships. In the future, posting a survey online that people could take more privately might encourage more honest answers with less biased results.

6. Implications for Social Work

The topic of sexual communication in middle and older adulthood is an important aspect of life that this population is facing. Within this population, many individuals are confronted with issues concerning sexual intercourse. Issues like menopause, andropause, erectile dysfunction, medical disabilities/conditions, or medications taken can affect sexual intimacy in a relationship or marriage. In turn, this can affect the sexual communication between the couple. A social worker's role is to educate and enable. An educator must explain the benefits of effective

communication within relationships, while an enabler's purpose is to promote and engage in positive change. Overall, one of the greatest challenges of the twenty-first century is the huge increase in the number of older adults in the United States and throughout the world. These Baby Boomers will require more services, and it is important for social workers to understand and fulfill the needs of this population. It is important that the proper skills and resources needed are present and readily available to help these individuals at all times. Thus, social workers must constantly be educating others and themselves. Social workers must also be aware of ethnic differences. Being culturally competent is a core value in social work and helps us build strong therapeutic helping relationships. A couple's relationship and sexual communication is shaped by their culture. Social workers need to be aware of how each culture is different and the values and beliefs associated with the client's culture. Social workers need to let the client be the expert, letting the client explain his or her own world view. By doing so, better social workers will be created, clients' needs will be met and tomorrow will be a brighter place.

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Appendix

Table 1. Ethnicity and Marital Status (N=54)

Marital Status	Ethnicity			Total
	Caucasian	Latino	African American	
Married	21	5	6	32
Domestic Partnership	5	6	11	22
Total	26	11	17	54

Table 2. Gender

Male	Female	Total
25	29	54

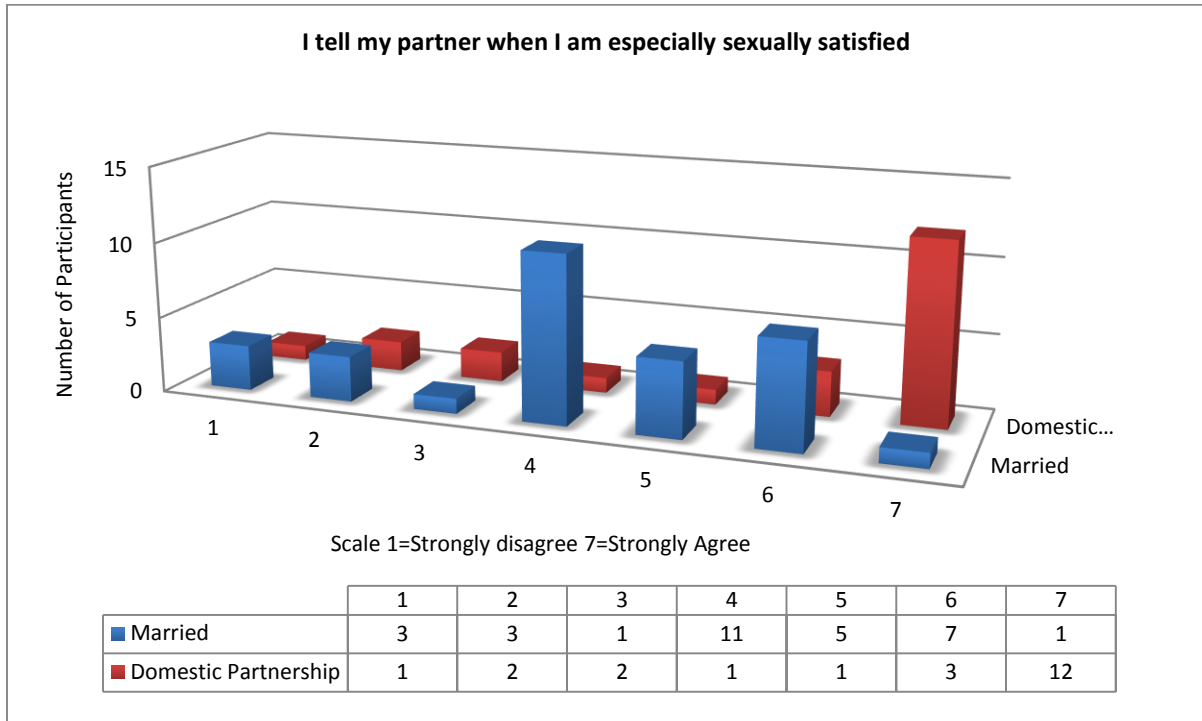


Figure 1. I tell my partner when I am especially sexually satisfied

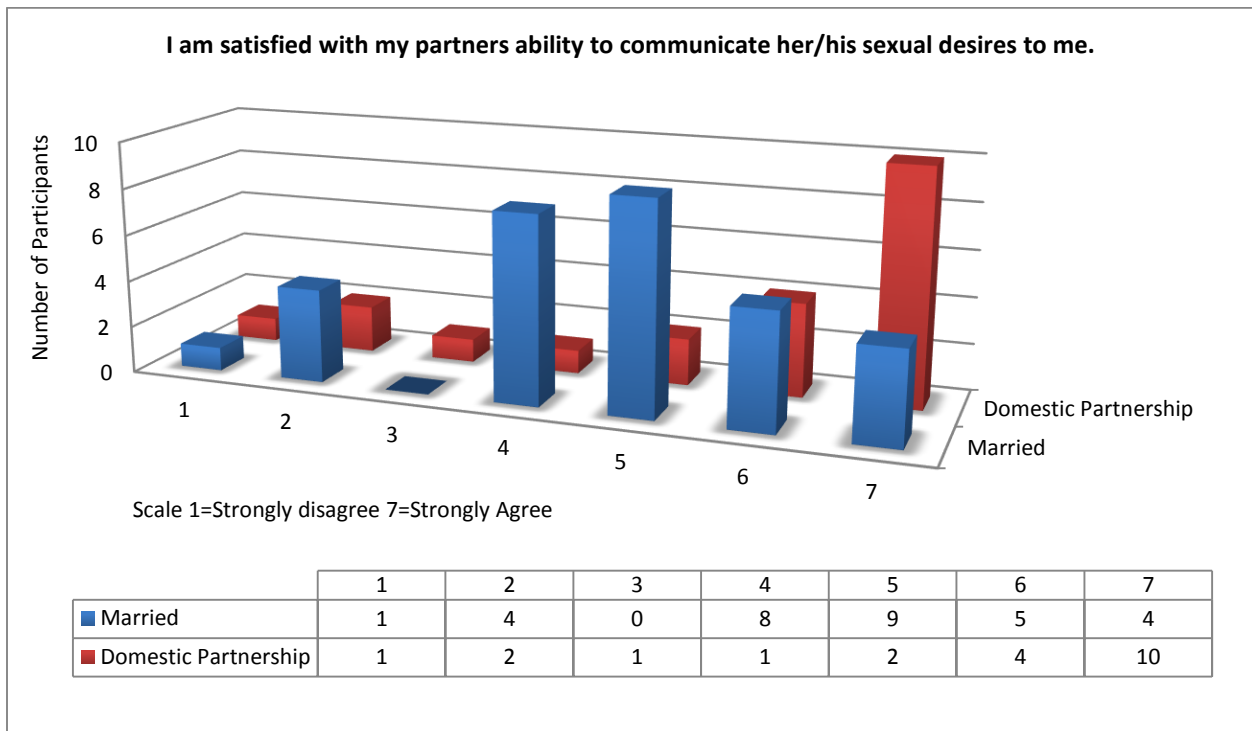


Figure 2. I am satisfied with my partners ability to communicate her/his sexual desires to me.

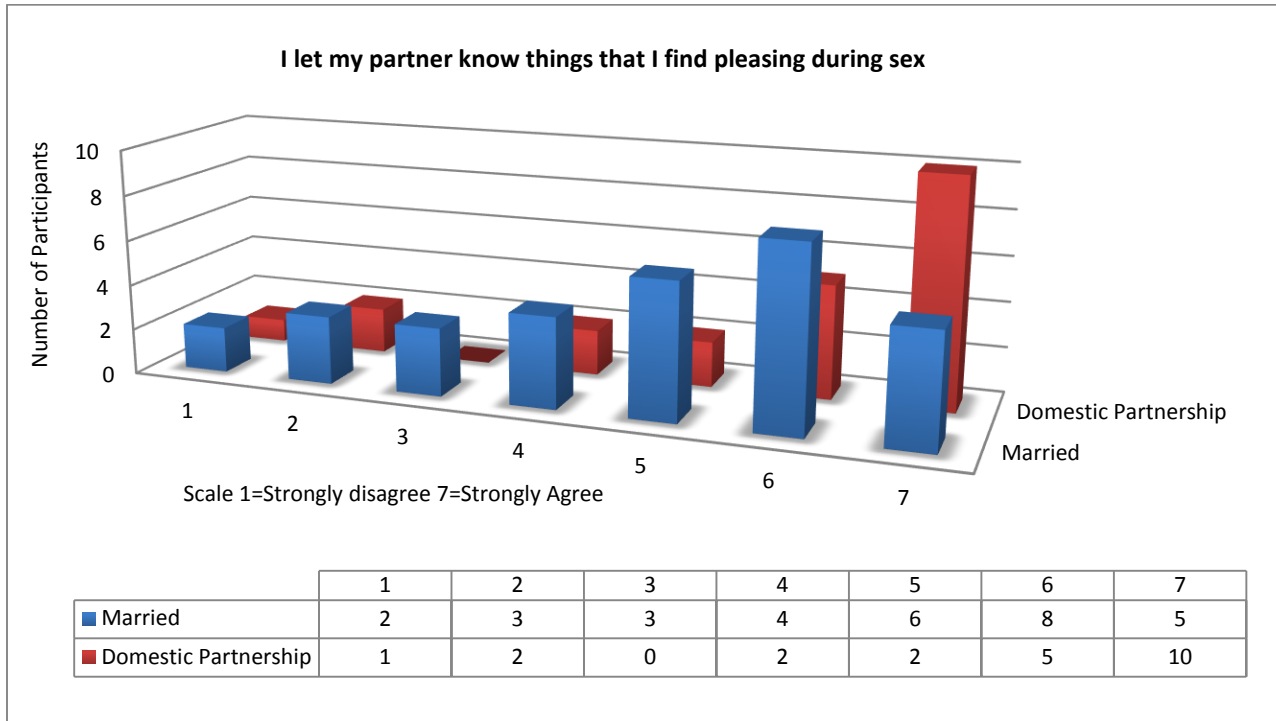


Figure 3. I let my partner know things that I find pleasing during sex.

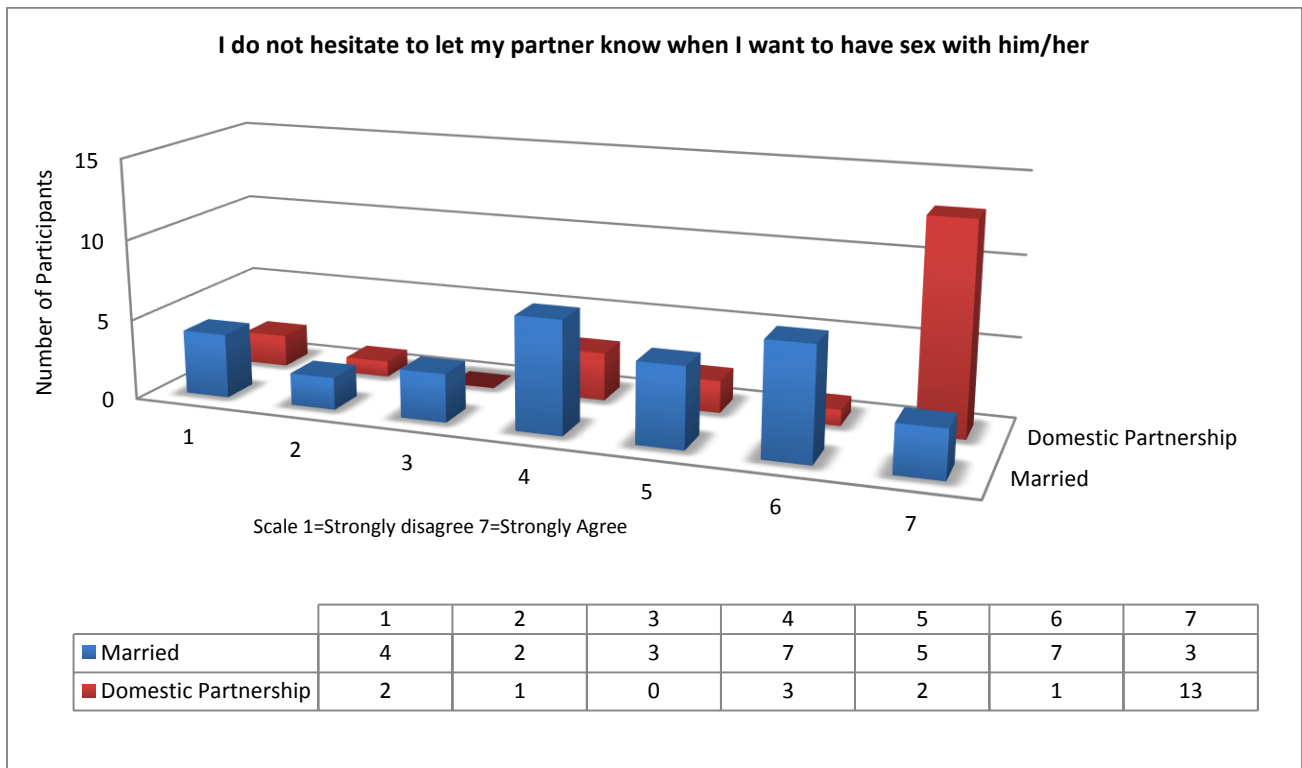


Figure 4. I do not hesitate to let my partner know when I want to have sex with him/her

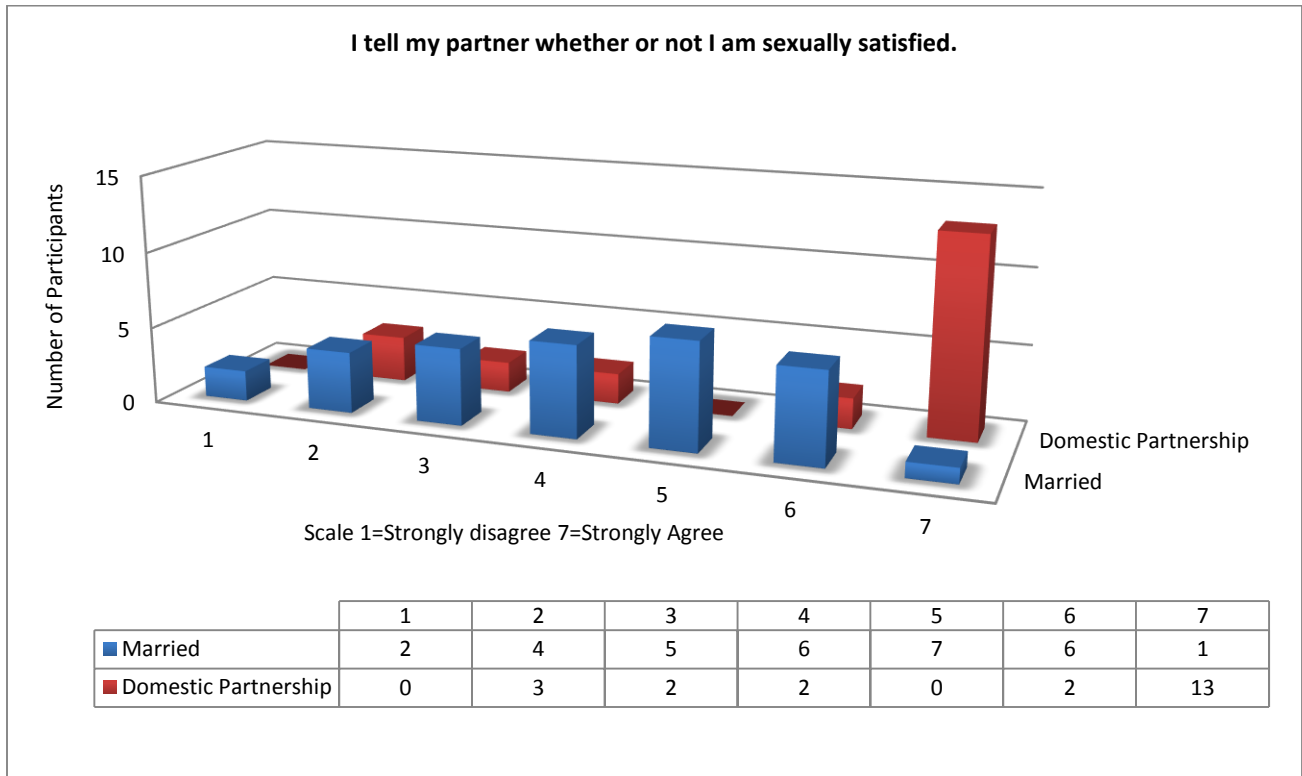


Figure 5. I tell my partner whether or not I am sexually satisfied.

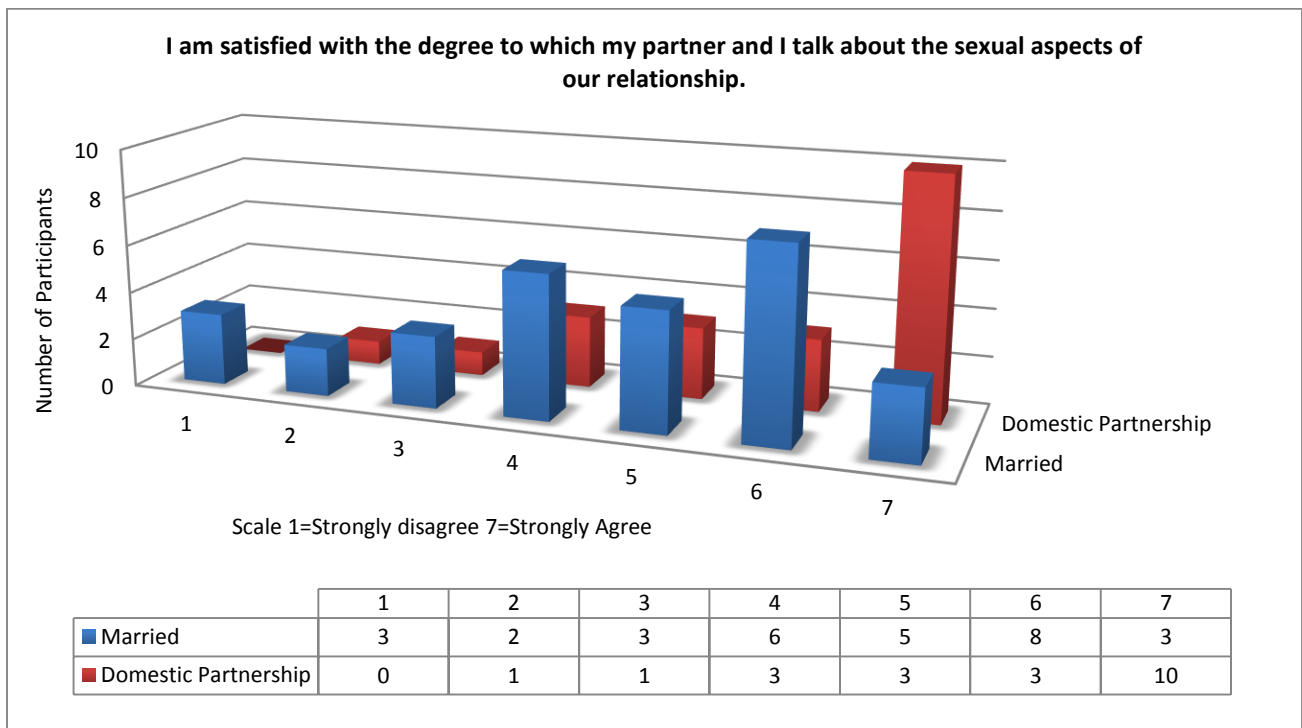


Figure 6. I am satisfied with the degree to which my partner and I talk about the sexual aspects of our relationship.

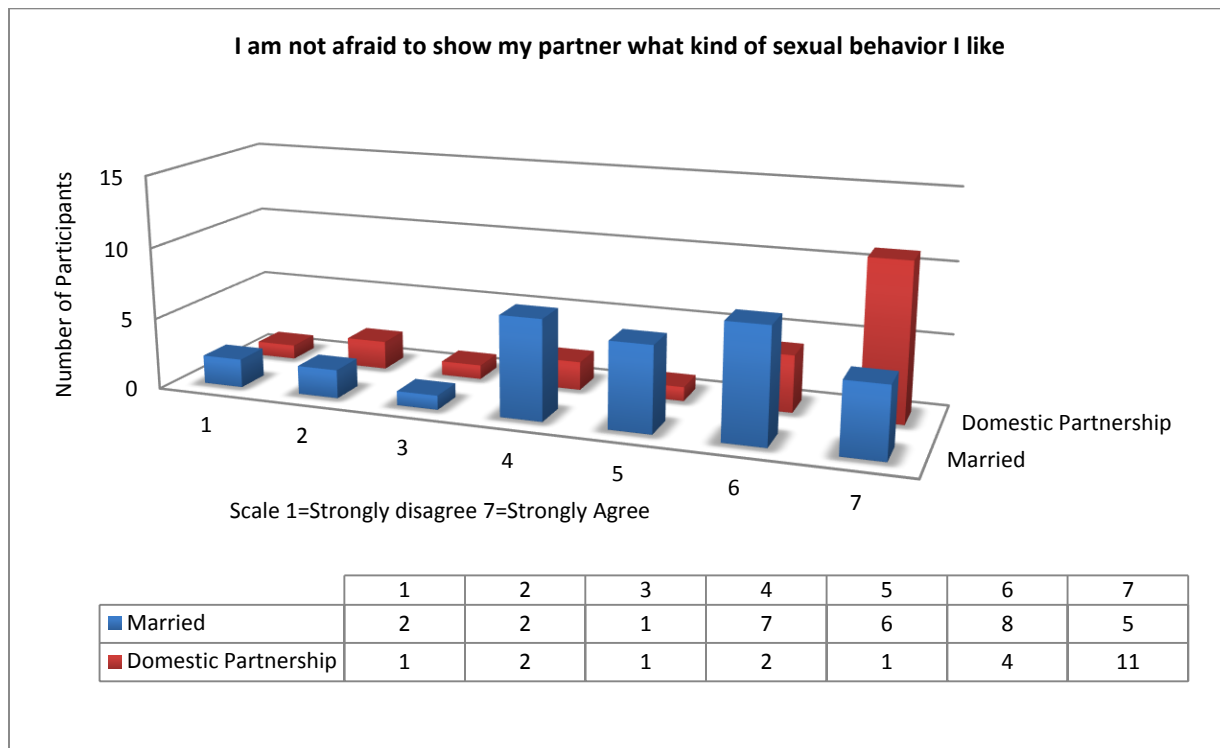


Figure 7. I am not afraid to show my partner what kind of sexual behavior I like

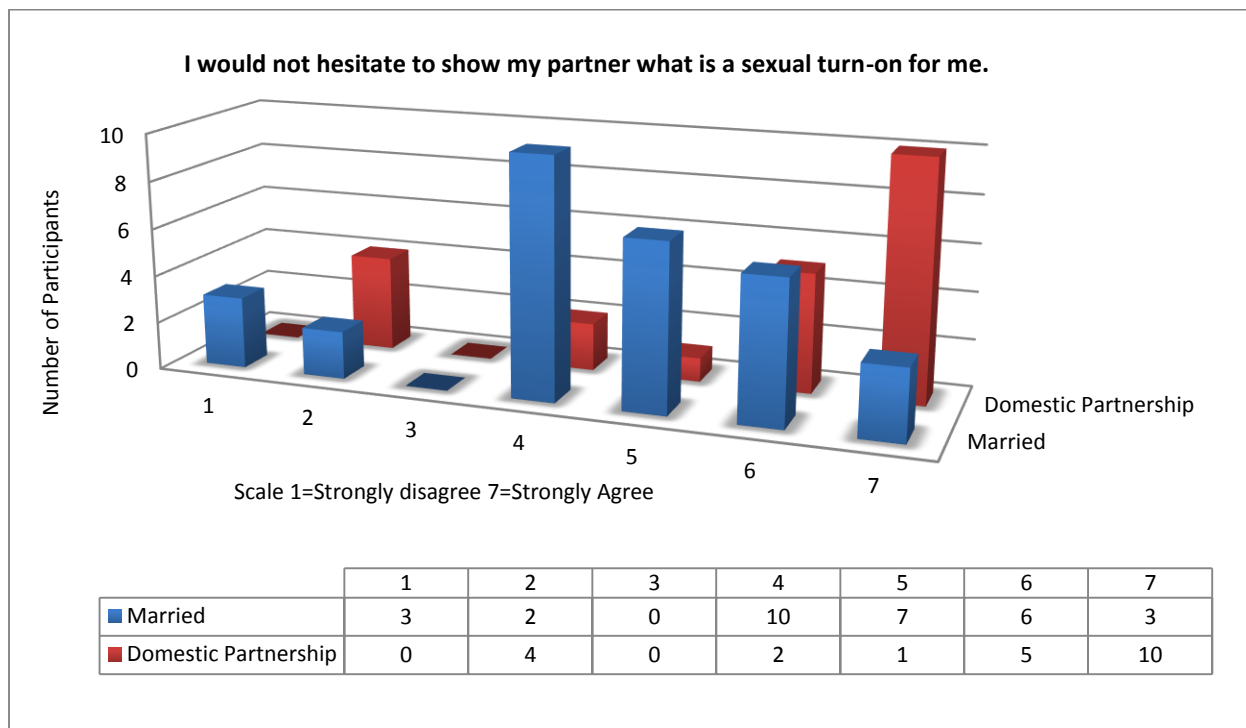


Figure 8. I would not hesitate to show my partner what is a sexual turn-on for me.

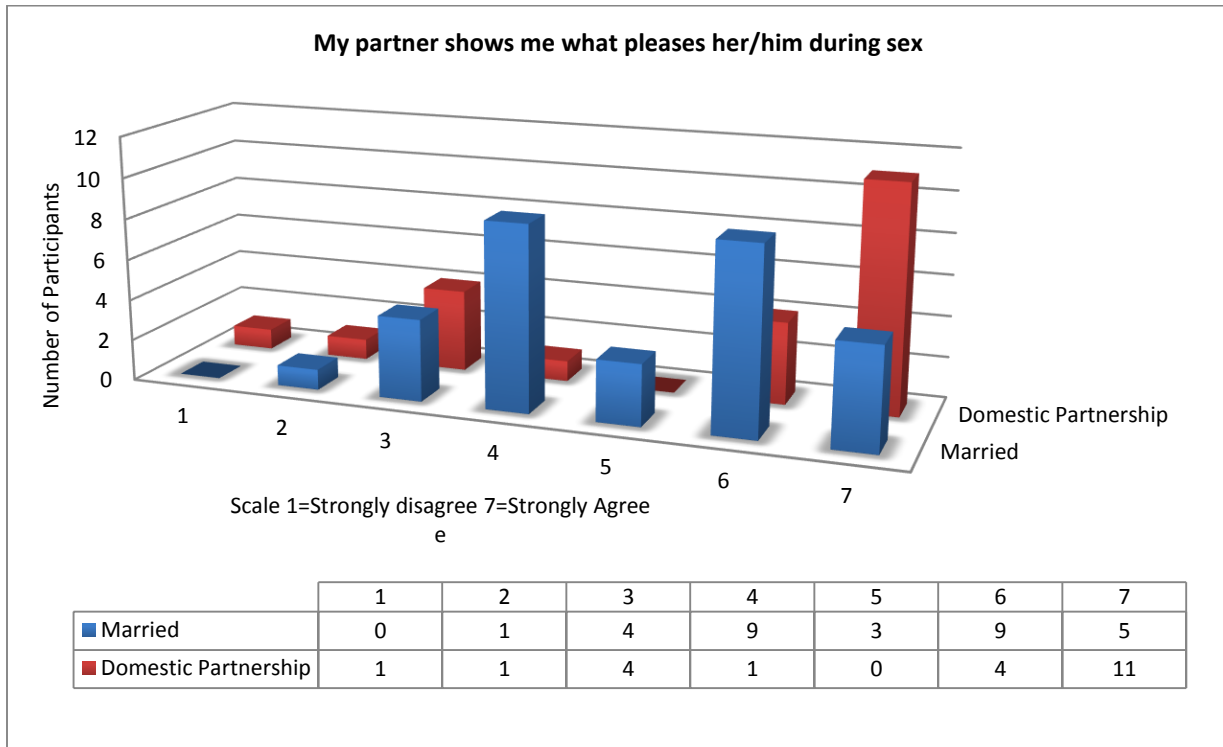


Figure 9. My partner shows me what pleases her/him during sex

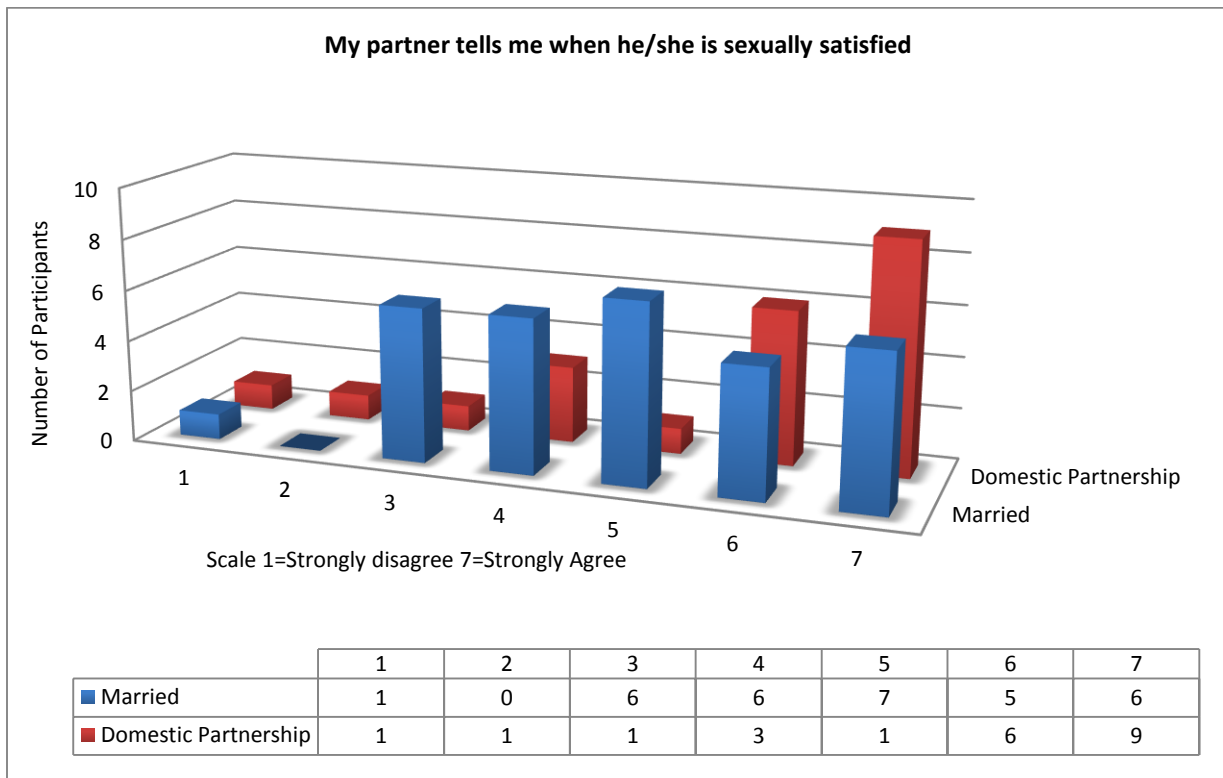


Figure 10. My partner tells me when he/she is sexually satisfied

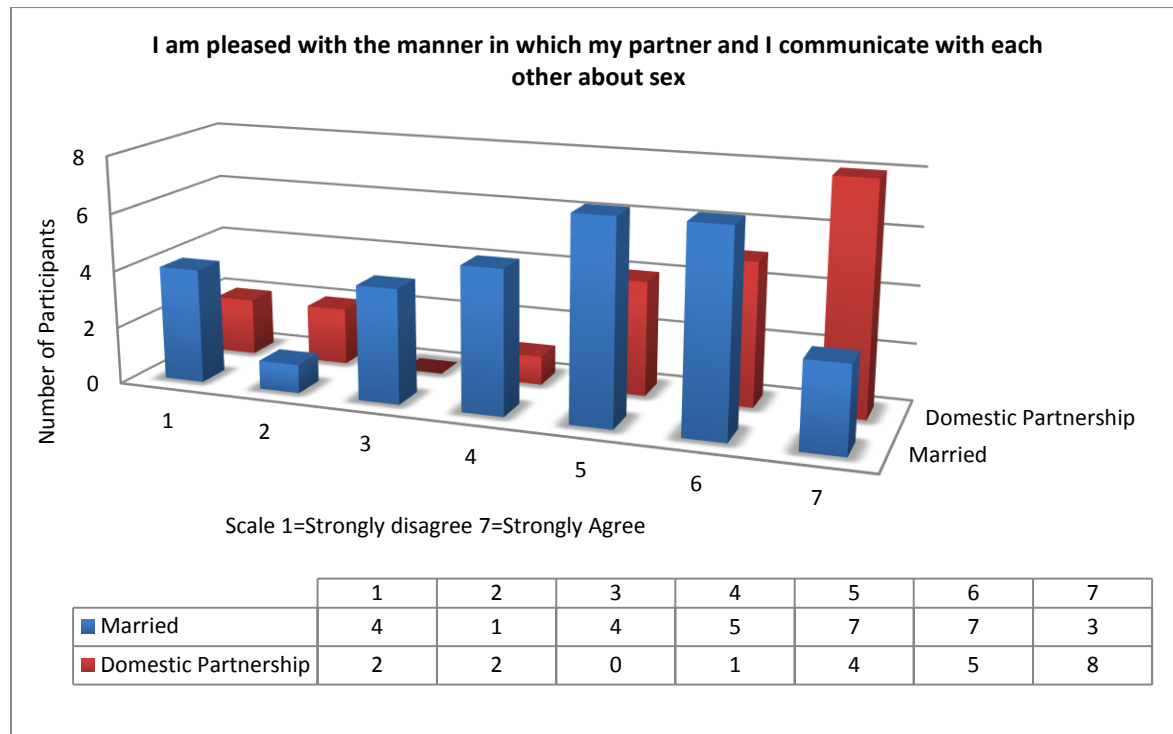


Figure 11. I am pleased with the manner in which my partner and I communicate with each other about sex

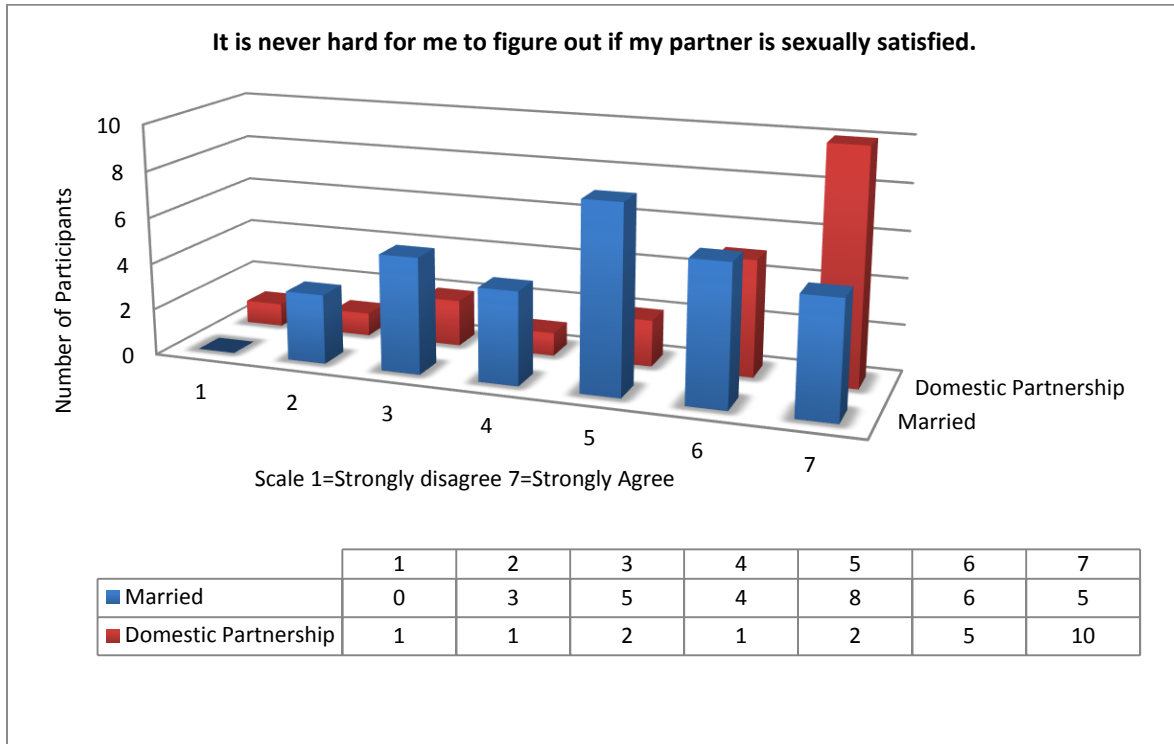


Figure 12. It is never hard for me to figure out if my partner is sexually satisfied.

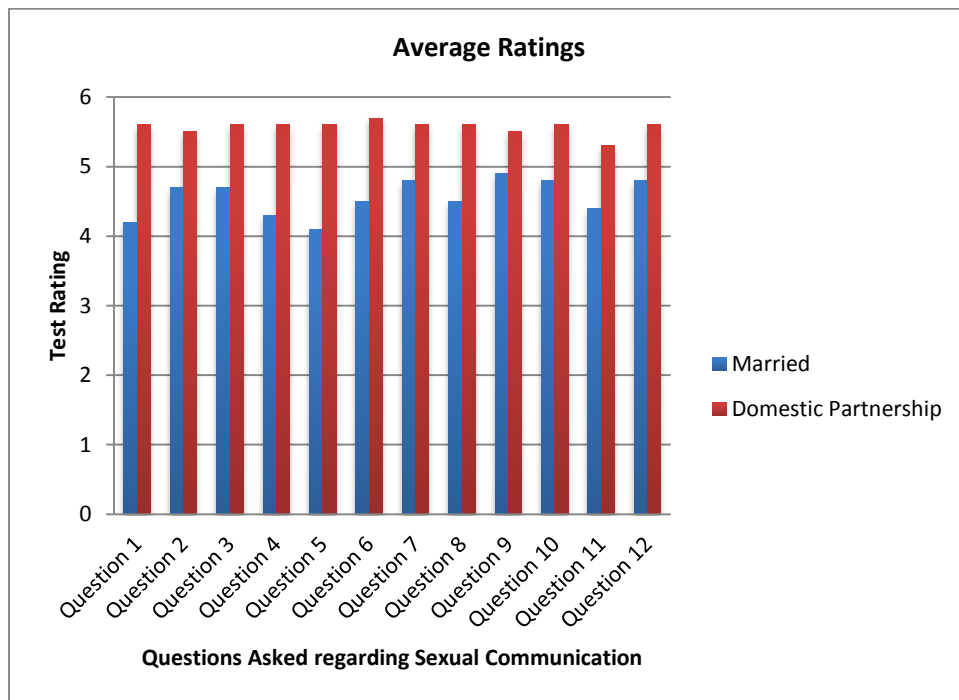


Figure 13. Average Ratings of Sexual Communication