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Borderline personality disorder (BPD) is characterized by unstable interpersonal relationships and frantic efforts to avoid abandonment (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Intimate partner victimization (IPV) is overrepresented within the romantic relationships of those with BPD and also affects them more negatively (Bouchard, Sabourin, Lussier, & Villeneuve, 2009). However, on the individual level, there may also be a particular mechanism by which people with BPD are more often victimized by their romantic partners (Few & Rosen, 2005). The aspect of BPD that best explains this association may be its hallmark diagnostic criterion—fear of abandonment.

This study attempted to induce feelings of insecurity about one's romantic relationship—using a false feedback manipulation—to see if this prime leads to attitudes more tolerant of sexual coercion from a romantic partner, which is a risk factor for intimate partner victimization. Participants were randomly told that they match poorly or highly with their partners. Participants higher in BPD features reported more tolerant attitudes toward sexual coercion. Moreover, there may be a significant interaction between BPD traits and condition. Those in the *poorly matched* condition expressed more tolerant attitudes toward sexual coercion the higher their borderline features; this association was not present in the *highly matched* condition. Follow-up analyses investigated various motivations for and approaches to sexual behavior. It appears that those higher in borderline features in the *poorly matched* condition use sexual behavior to avoid losing their partner or having conflict with their partner.

FEAR OF ABANDONMENT, BORDERLINE PERSONALITY FEATURES, AND ATTITUDES REGARDING INTIMATE PARTNER VICTIMIZATION

by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"I would rather be physically abused than be alone." This and similar accounts from clients with borderline personality disorder (BPD) are the inspiration for this study. A propensity to perform activities in the face of abandonment that one wouldn't do otherwise can be detrimental. A subclinical sample was tested to see whether attitudes toward sexual coercion in women with stronger borderline personality disorder traits vary depending on whether feelings of potential loneliness and abandonment have been induced.

Borderline Personality Disorder

He loves me; he loves me not. She's perfect; she's too perfect and she's going to leave me. I deserve their love; I could never be deserving of their love. Disjointed thoughts such as these fill the minds of many people suffering from BPD. This personality disorder is characterized most distinctly by an instability that pervades multiple contexts—interpersonal relationships, distorted self-image, intense and unstable affect, and marked impulsivity (APA, 2013). The prevalence of BPD in the general population is estimated to be between 1.6 and 5.9% (Torgersen, 2009; Grant et al., 2008, respectively), and approximately three-quarters of the individuals receiving a BPD diagnosis are women (APA, 2013).

People affected by BPD are not restricted to those with a diagnosis. Within their interpersonal relationships those with BPD often alternate between extremes in how they view others—a friend, a family member, a significant other. In romantic relationships, people with BPD may idealize their partner and can be demanding of their time and attention one moment but soon after may devalue their partner and feel like the partner does not care enough (APA, 2013). This devaluation is typically in response to real or anticipated rejection, which often elicits fears of abandonment (Gunderson, 1984). Individuals with BPD may make frantic efforts to avoid rejection by engaging in impulsive actions (e.g., self-mutilation or suicidal behaviors; APA, 2013). Bouchard, Sabourin, Lussier, and Villeneuve (2009) report that people with BPD may also engage in risky sexual behaviors to avoid being abandoned. It is clear that this kind of attitude would be especially maladaptive within a romantic relationship that is already likely to be complicated.

Oliver, Perry, and Cade (2008) suggested that the level of dysfunction present in the relationships of people with BPD tends to increase as the intimacy of the relationship increases—making romantic relationships especially vulnerable. In a review of empirical studies that have addressed the sexual functioning of people diagnosed with BPD, Neeleman (2007) also concluded that they generally have significant problems regarding intimate and sexual relationships. Increased levels of dysfunction in romantic relationships can result in intimate partner victimization (IPV).

BPD and Intimate Partner Victimization

IPV can manifest in a variety of ways—physically, sexually, verbally, emotionally, financially. In general, people in aggressive romantic relationships are likely to meet the second most important feature of BPD: "a pattern of unstable and intense interpersonal relationships characterized by alternating between extremes of idealization and devaluation" (APA, 2013, p. 633). Combined with the characteristic "frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment," it is no surprise that this condition is correlated with being in an abusive relationship. Anecdotally, BPD clients are in relationships that involve IPV, stating for example, "I would rather be abused than have him leave me." Empirically, Bouchard, Sabourin, et al. (2009) reported that women with BPD experienced more physical and psychological aggression (M = 1.51, SD = 2.72 and M = 13.37, SD = 18.34, respectively) than women from the healthy control group (M = 0.31, SD = .89 and M = 3.88, SD = 5.00, respectively). Maneta, Cohen, Schulz, and Waldinger (2013) found that a woman's level of borderline personality features was significantly correlated with her partner's use of violence towards her (r = 0.26). Zanarini et al. (2005) report that women with borderline personality traits are at a higher risk of experiencing emotional, physical, verbal, and sexual abuse. It is clear that BPD and IPV are related; but why?

Partner Selection. A propensity to pair with potential perpetrators is one factor that may predispose those with BPD to being victimized by their romantic partners. Bouchard, Godbout, and Sabourin (2009) found that nearly 52.9% of the men in their study—who were partnered with woman diagnosed with BPD—met criterion A for

antisocial personality disorder (APD), which specifies that they were diagnosable with conduct disorder before the age of 15. Given that the *DSM-5* criteria for both APD and conduct disorder include physical aggression toward others (APA, 2013), the high incidence of IPV in couples in which the woman is diagnosed with BPD might not be surprising. However, even when individuals with BPD partner with other—less toxic—people, they may still be vulnerable to victimization simply due to their own personality and relational characteristics.

The responsibility for sexual aggression clearly rests with the perpetrator, and it is important to identify and understand the factors that lead to the perpetration of sexual aggression, such as APD traits. However, romantic relationships are a dyadic process, so it is also important to understand intrapersonal variables when researching sexual aggression. For this reason, Few and Rosen (2005) argued that identifying characteristics of sexual aggression victims is essential to understand the factors that add to risk for victimization. Unfortunately, little is known concerning specific interpersonal factors that increase an individual's risk for experiencing sexual aggression (Young & Furman, 2008). Considering the abovementioned findings, a BPD diagnosis is clearly a risk factor for being victimized by a romantic partner.

Child Sexual Abuse. There most oft-studied risk factor for both BPD and IPV is child sexual abuse (CSA; Polusny & Follette, 2005). Raczek (1992) reported that 69% of subjects who were victims of CSA, compared to 35% of nonabused subjects, were diagnosed with BPD. Several empirical studies have also supported the hypothesis that women who were sexually abused as children show a greater vulnerability to

revictimization later in life. Briere (1988) reported a significant correlation between a history of CSA and later rape or sexual assault during adulthood. Wyatt et al. (1993) further found that victims of CSA were at risk for becoming involved with a physically abusive partner. Child sexual abuse may be the "why" and fear of abandonment the "when." Looking closer at the association between BPD and IPV, a sensitivity to loneliness may be the driving personality characteristic of individuals with BPD that predisposes them toward IPV.

Fear of Abandonment

While BPD is a constellation of traits, there may be a particular feature that is vital in understanding increased rates of IPV in this population. The most important diagnostic criterion of BPD—"frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment" (APA, 2013)—may be an intrapersonal mechanism for "when" this population is more likely to be victimized sexually. In fact, individuals with this trait may be willing to engage in behaviors that may put them at risk for victimization if they believe that such behaviors will prevent abandonment. For girls, being sensitive to rejection is significantly correlated with being more willing to "do anything to keep partner with [them], even things [they] know are wrong" (r = .38-.40; Purdie & Downey, 2000). Moreover, Young and Furman (2008) reported that scoring above the median on sensitivity to rejection indicated that the participant was 31% more likely to experience sexual aggression than those below the median; Downey et al. (1998) reported that they are also more negatively impacted by them (ß = .22).

In addition to the abovementioned effects, those high in BPD traits may have difficulty setting and enforcing clear boundaries for sexual activity. Individuals preoccupied with abandonment—such as those with BPD—tend to have sex with their romantic partners to reassure themselves that their partner cares about them and to captivate their partner's attention (Bouchard, Sabourin, et al., 2009). Evidencing this, Schachner and Shaver (2004) reported that individuals insecure about their relationship were motivated to go along with a partner's sexual demands in order to be emotionally valued by partner (ß = .29) and to make their partner love them more (ß = .13). In a sample of couples in which at least one partner was diagnosed with BPD, Bouchard, Sabourin, et al. (2009) reported that sexuality is often used to soothe a fear of abandonment—a conclusion based on qualitative data. Because of an increased sensitivity to losing a partner, individuals with BPD may be more tolerant of sexual aggression from said partner—a strategy to retain their relationship. In all, both the attitudes and behaviors of people with BPD traits put them at risk to be sexually victimized by their partner.

Present Study

The extant literature is rife with correlational studies looking at borderline personality disorder and intimate partner victimization; I used an experimental design. An oft-criticized aspect of most fields, this deficiency in experimental work is more acceptable in the sexual aggression domain because of obvious ethical limitations, such as manipulating levels of sexual aggression or using actual sexual victimization as an outcome variable. Thus, I studied risk factors for sexual victimization as an outcome

variable—rather than actual victimization. Specifically, I assessed attitudes toward intimate partner sexual coercion as my outcome measure.

As for my experimental manipulation, I used an induction that is similar to Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, and Stucke's (2001) future alone paradigm. This manipulation gives participants an accurate report of a previously administered personality inventory in addition to randomly assigned results. The future alone paradigm tells participants that they will have either unsuccessful or successful relationships based on their personality characteristics. However, the manipulation in the present study gave participants false feedback about their current relationship. In the *highly matched* condition, people were told that they match well with their partner and that there are positive aspects about the longevity and quality of their relationship; the reverse was the case in the *poorly matched* condition. Both conditions also hinted that there are things one can do to increase their relationship longevity and quality. If it were insinuated that there was no hope in rectifying the relationship, it might be that people would not be willing to do things to retain the relationship (e.g., engage in unwanted sexual activity).

In the *poorly matched* condition, it is expected that participants will be primed to consider the possibility of abandonment in their current relationship. I predicted that the experimentally induced fear of abandonment would produce more tolerant attitudes toward intimate partner sexual coercion for those higher in borderline personality traits. Attitudes toward sexual coercion was the primary outcome measure used in the regression analyses. Because people may report attitudes toward sexual coercion differentially based on their motivations for sexual behavior (Muise, Impett, Kogan &

Desmarais, 2013), I also examined various approaches to sexual behavior as outcome measures in an exploratory manner.

Hypotheses

1. I predicted that participants in the *poorly matched* condition, compared to those in the *highly matched*, would report attitudes more tolerant of sexual coercion.
2. The effect of BPD features on attitudes toward sexual coercion will vary by condition: in the *poorly matched* condition increasing levels of BPD traits will be associated with more tolerant attitudes toward sexual coercion; this effect will not be present in the *highly matched* condition.

CHAPTER II

METHOD

Participants

To participate in this study, students had to be female, had to be at least eighteen years of age, and had to have been in a romantic relationship for at least two months. Males were excluded from this study because females predominantly receive the BPD diagnosis (APA, 2013). To best generalize findings from a non-diagnosed student sample to persons actually diagnosed with BPD, I restricted my sample to females at UNCG. Also, females are significantly more likely to be victims of sexual aggression. In Hines, Armstrong, Reed, and Cameron's (2012) sample of 535 male and 1,381 female college students, 6.6% of women reported being the victim of at least one act of sexual assault, while this was only the case for 3.2% of males. Participants also had to be 18 or older because of the emphasis on BPD. According to the DSM 5, personality does not become crystallized until age 18 or older (APA, 2013). Participants had to currently be in a romantic relationship that had lasted for at least two month to ensure that they had enough experience with and attachment to their partner to be able to appropriately respond to survey items.

A total of 161 students in psychology classes at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) participated in this study and received course credit. Undergraduate females who have been in a romantic relationship for at least two months

were recruited to participate in a two-part study. Per *a priori* exclusionary criteria, data were excluded from sixteen female participants for responding the same way on every item or not responding to any items, four were excluded for being male, and one was excluded for not being in a romantic relationship for at least two months. In addition, ten participants indicated that they did not want their data to be used in response to the revelation that deception was used in this study. Of the final sample of 130, the average age was 19.05 years (SD = 1.27 years) and the average length of relationship was 17.19 months (SD = 12.57 months). The racial demographics of the sample were consistent with the diverse makeup at UNCG: 49.2% Caucasian, 31.5% African American, 6.2% Asian American, 6.2% Hispanic, and 7.8% other. The sexual orientation of the vast majority of the participants was heterosexual (87.7%); 3.1% reported being homosexual and 9.2% other.

Power Analysis. To best identify our anticipated effect size, I looked at a recent study with methods most similar to those of the proposed study. Skinner and Nelson-Gray (2014) conducted a multiple regression analysis using BPD traits and rejection sensitivity to predict change in mood due to a rejection induction. This study found that BPD traits, rejection sensitivity, and the interaction between the two explained significant variations in different types of mood. Skinner and Nelson-Gray (2014) only had enough power to detect a medium effect size ($k = 3$, $n = 147$). Therefore, to feel most confident in findings that support or reject the hypotheses, this study was be powered enough to find a medium effect size, if it exists.

Our sample of 130 participants slightly exceeds the recommended sample size of 128. To find a medium effect size with 80% power and using ANOVA with two groups (g = 2), Cohen (1992) requires this sample size of 128 participants—64 in each group. Hypothesis 2 only required 76 participants to detect a medium effect size. A multiple linear regression model with three predictors—BPD traits, one condition variable (coded "0" and "1"), and the interaction between the BPD traits and condition—was be used to test this hypothesis. Even though I collected enough participants to theoretically come across a medium effect size, the effect size of the hypothesized interaction may be smaller.

Materials

Personality Assessment Inventory-Borderline Features (Morey, 1991). The Personality Assessment Inventory-Borderline Features (PAI-BOR) is a 24-item self-report measure of BPD traits. Participants are asked to rate how accurate each item is of them on a 4-point scale—false, slightly true, mainly true, and very true. Trull (1995) reports that a cutoff of ≥38 should be used to indicate the presence of significant BPD features. 17.7% (N = 23) of the sample met this criteria. Even though we did not oversample for BPD traits, my distribution of these traits was similar to studies that do; Skinner & Nelson-Gray (2014) reported that ~20% of their participants were at or above this cutoff. That said, this study supports the value of viewing BPD—and other personality disorders—as a continuum of severity rather than simply as a categorical diagnosis (Widiger & Frances, 1989). With a base rate of less than 2%, most of the participants in my study were not expected to meet criteria for a BPD diagnosis.

However, people with subclinical PD features also conduct their romantic lives in maladaptive ways (Daley et al., 2000; Kuhlken & Nelson-Gray, 2014).

Big Five Inventory (John & Srivastava, 1999). The Big Five Inventory (BFI) is a 44-item measure that assesses an individual on the big five dimensions of personality: Extraversion, Agreeableness, Conscientiousness, Neuroticism, and Openness (Goldberg, 1995). Participants were asked to indicate on a 5-point scale—"Disagree strongly" to "Agree strongly"—the extent to which each statement describes themselves. Participants also answered the same 44-items with respect to how well each statement describes their current partner. This measure and its results were used as part of the manipulation; no data from the BFI were analyzed for this study.

Fear of Abandonment Manipulation. Since its inception, the future alone manipulation has been able to reliably induce feelings of rejection (Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001). The script in the present study differs from Twenge et al.'s (2001) inaugural version to make the induction most applicable to our research questions. First, the *poorly matched* condition indicates that the differences in personality—though great—are not irreconcilable. I thought it was important to make it clear that the participants could do things (e.g., tolerate sexual coercion) that would offset their "poor match." Second, this manipulation focuses on the participant's current relationship rather than interpersonal functioning more broadly. This revised manipulation may also be less devastating to the participant, since it is less harsh in its language. However, this study's manipulation retains the structure of the future alone paradigm. To gain credibility, the survey generator first gave an accurate assessment of the participant's responses to the

personality inventory (e.g., "Your EXTRAVERSION score indicates that you are likely sociable and assertive" if they scored high on extraversion items). The survey generator then provided a randomly assigned match rating and script. In the *poorly matched* condition, the participant was shown:

> Based on the results from the questionnaires, it has been calculated that you and your partner have a compatibility rate that is in the 11th percentile. This means that the two of you are better matched than only 11 out of 100 couples. Typically, we see that relationships with match rates this low last shorter amounts of time and have higher rates of conflict. However, couples are able to overcome such personality differences through hard work.

In contrast, people in the *highly matched* condition were shown:

> Based on the results from the questionnaires, it has been calculated that you and your partner have a compatibility rate that is in the 89th percentile. This means that the two of you are better matched than 89 out of 100 couples. Typically, we see that relationships with match rates this high last longer amounts of time and have lower rates of conflict. Couples with such similar personalities do not have to work hard to overcome differences.

Manipulation Checks. In Gerber and Wheeler's (2009) meta-analysis of rejection manipulations, only one published study (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005) used both the future alone paradigm and a manipulation check. In this study, participants rated their mood on a scale ranging from 1 ("very negative") to 7 ("very positive") following the manipulation. This manipulation check found that the future alone manipulation in Baumeister et al.'s (2005) study was effective in altering mood. The current study included this item as a pre- and post-test, using the change in scores as a manipulation check. In addition—to assess change in feelings of rejection—

another item asking participants to rate on a scale from 1 ("very hesitant") to 7 ("very confident") how they feel about the status of their current relationship before and after the manipulation. We conducted individual samples t-tests to assess the effectiveness of the manipulation. These analyses revealed that the manipulation had a significant effect on mood ($t(128) = -2.785$, $p = .006$; $d = .05$; [*Figure 1*]) but not on confidence in one's relationship ($t(128) = .268$, $p = .789$; $d = .59$ [*Figure 2*]). Participants' significant change in mood in the poorly matched condition was negative, and that in the highly matched condition was positive. Interestingly, one's confidence in her relationship significantly increased within both conditions. While expected in the highly matched condition, this change may have been the result of reacting defensively to negative feedback within the poorly matched condition.

Sexual Attitude Scales. A battery of three questionnaires, measuring various attitudes toward sexual activity with a current partner, was administered. One measure looked at attitudes toward sexual coercion and was the primary outcome measure used in the regression analyses; the other two measures were supplementary and were used to examine the motivations for these attitudes in an exploratory manner.

This study asked participants how they would hypothetically respond to each of the seven types of sexual coercion identified by Basile (2002). Basile asked women "For each of the following circumstances, think of your current or most recent partner. Please tell me if you ever had sex with that person when you really did not want to…" Informed by the BPD literature, an eighth type of sexual coercion was included in this measure—"if [your partner] threatened to leave you." Together, the eight types of sexual coercion

used in these surveys assess a variety of representations of intimate partner aggression—physical, sexual, emotional, verbal, and financial. Also, to better capture the experiences of the first- and second-year college students that predominantly comprise this study's sample, "sexual activity" was used in place of "sexual intercourse." Basile's (2002) sample included only heterosexual females; anticipating a more diverse sample in this study, the pronouns used in these measures were based on each individual participant's response to the sexual orientation question in the demographics. Participants reported the likelihood that they would engage in sexual activity with their current partner in situations involving each of the eight types of sexual coercion (7-point Likert scale, ranging from definitely not to definitely; Appendix A).

Two other scales investigating sexual motivations were administered. First, a modified version of the Approach/Avoidance Sex Motivation Scale assessed whether participants engage in sexual behavior to please their partners (i.e., approach) or to avoid conflicts (i.e., avoidance; Impett, Peplau, & Gable, 2005). The original scale asks about sexual behavior in general, but this study asked the same questions in reference to unwanted sexual activity. This 9-item measure uses a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from "Not at all important" to "Extremely important." Items assessing approach sex motivations and those assessing avoidance sex motivations were analyzed separately to individually look at these distinct constructs. Next, the Sexual Relationship Scale (SRS; Hughes & Snell, 1990) was included to measure communal and exchange approaches to sexual relationships. More specifically, the SRS was developed to assess chronic dispositional differences in the type of orientation that people take toward their sexual

relations. The SRS consists of 24 items arranged in a 5-point Likert format, ranging from "Not at all characteristic of me" to "Very characteristic of me." It contains two subscales: the Exchange Approach to Sexual Relations (i.e., *quid pro quo*) and the Communal Approach to Sexual Relations (i.e., emphasizing the well-being of the partner); these subscales were used to differentially examine these approaches to sexual relations.

Procedure

Undergraduate females who have been in a romantic relationship for at least two months were recruited to participate in a two-part study; this ruse was done to dissociate the manipulation ("Study 1") from the outcome measure ("Study 2"). Recruitment involved students enrolled in General Psychology and select 200-level psychology courses at UNCG. All students meeting selection criteria were recruited via email. These participants received course credit for their participation.

Students who decided to participate in this study received a link to the surveys on Qualtrics. Participants were asked to wait until they could devote sixty uninterrupted minutes to complete the study on their own personal computers. "Study 1" was presented as a study on partner similarity. Participants first completed the demographics (including pre-tests of relationship confidence and mood; see Appendix B), PAI-BOR, and the BFI—in that order. All participants then received an accurate assessment of their BFI scores. They then completed the BFI for their romantic partners. After this, participants randomly received false feedback regarding how well their personality matches with their partner's—either the *poorly matched* script or the *highly matched* script. At this point, participants were told that Study 1 ended. "Study 2" was presented as a study on attitudes

toward sexual aggression. Participants again filled out the demographics for two reasons: (1) to allay suspicion that the prime is related to the outcome and (2) to obtain post-test measures of relationship confidence and mood. They then completed the scales measuring sexual attitudes on sexual coercion, motivations, and approaches.

Participants were then debriefed and given the contact information for the UNCG counseling center and the UNCG sexual violence campus advocate (see Appendix C). They were told that the feedback regarding how well they are matched with their partner was a randomly assigned description. There was also an apology for the false feedback and an explanation of the rationale for the deception. Finally, participants were asked to indicate (1) that they understand the feedback was random, (2) whether they suspected deception was used, and (3) whether they want their data to be used. Twenty-eight participants indicated that they suspected deception was used. Because hindsight bias may be in play, these participants were not excluded from the analyses as presented. However, the significance—or non-significance—of the hypothesis testing results did not change whether they were included or excluded. The ten participants that withdrew their data were excluded from all analyses.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

All analyses presented in this section used the final sample size of 130 detailed earlier. Descriptive statistics for all variables used in the current study are presented in *Table 1*. The raw scores for the PAI-BOR are listed in *Tables 1* and *2*; however, these scores were centered about the mean for all regression analyses. The values for symmetry and kurtosis for all measures were acceptable (i.e., between -2 and +2) in order to suggest a normal univariate distribution (George & Mallery, 2010). Cronbach's alpha was calculated in order to examine the internal consistency of each scale, and all fell within the acceptable to excellent range, except for the Exchange Approach to Sexual Relations subscale. Because this measure was used only for exploratory analyses, this data from this scale were not discarded; however, any findings using this measure should be interpreted with caution.

Zero-order Pearson correlations were conducted to examine associations between all study variables. Next, independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to determine whether there were any significant differences between participants in the *poorly matched* and *highly matched* conditions. Descriptive statistics of *t*-tests for equality of means for all study variables are presented in *Table 2*. Participants in the two groups significantly differed from each other on Exchanges Approaches to Sexual Behavior. All

other group differences were non-significant. Finally, hierarchical linear regression models were tested to investigate unique contributions of BPD features, the manipulation, and their interaction to predict attitudes toward sexual coercion. Unique contributions were also examined in the prediction of four various motivations for sexual behavior.

Prior to conducting linear multiple regression analyses, Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and tolerance indices of all predictor variables were calculated to confirm that this sample's data did not have issues regarding multicollinearity (*Mean* VIF = 1.001 and *Mean* Tolerance = .999; Cohen, Cohen, West, & Aiken, 2003). For all regression models, the two experimental conditions were coded "0" for *poorly matched* and "1" for *highly matched*. Higher values for on the Responses to the Idea of Engaging in Unwanted Sexual Activity with a Romantic Partner measure indicate attitudes more tolerant of sexual coercion; higher values for all other scales indicate higher endorsement for each of the constructs being measures.

Correlations

Correlations among all study variables are presented in *Table 3*. Zero-order Pearson correlations were conducted to assess bivariate associates between PAI-BOR scores, attitudes toward sexual coercion, approach/avoidance sexual motivations, and communal/exchange approaches to sexual behavior. Of note, BPD features and attitudes toward sexual coercion were significantly correlated ($r = .36$, $p < .001$): higher levels of BPD features predicted attitudes more tolerant of sexual coercion. These same attitudes were also correlated with increasing endorsement of avoidance motivations for sex ($r =$

.36, $p < .001$). Neither BPD traits nor attitudes tolerant of sexual coercion were correlated with any of the other approaches to sexual behavior.

Hypothesis Testing

In Hypothesis 1, I predicted that participants in the *poorly matched* condition, compared to those in the *highly matched*, would report attitudes more tolerant of sexual coercion. The data did not support Hypothesis 1, which predicted that attitudes toward sexual coercion would vary by condition ($t(128) = -.759$, $p = .449$; $d = .14$ [*Figure 3*]).

Hypothesis 2 was that the effect of BPD features on attitudes toward sexual coercion will vary by condition: in the *poorly matched* condition increasing levels of BPD traits will be associated with more tolerant attitudes toward sexual coercion; this effect will not be present in the *highly matched* condition. To examine whether the effect of level of BPD features on attitudes toward sexual coercion varies by condition, I used a multiple linear regression model with three predictors—BPD traits, the condition variable, and the interaction between the BPD traits and condition. This model was tested in three steps: (1) only BPD traits, (2) BPD traits and condition variable and (3) BPD traits, condition variable, and the interaction term (*Table 4*). Each step was expected to be a statistically significant predictor of the outcome variable. BPD traits significantly predicted attitudes more tolerant sexual coercion (ß = .355, $p < .001$; $\Delta R^2 = .126$). Condition did not predict attitudes about sexual coercion over-and-above BPD traits (ß = .054, $p = .519$; $\Delta R^2 = .003$). The predicted interaction between BPD traits and condition was also not significant (ß = -2.08, $p = .070$; $\Delta R^2 = .022$). Because this interaction was an a priori hypothesis and because this study may be underpowered, simple slopes

analyses—using experimental condition as the moderator—were still conducted to probe the nature of this potential interaction. From this, one sees that participants in the *poorly matched* condition reported attitudes significantly more tolerant of sexual coercion if they had higher levels of BPD traits (ß = .464, $p < .001$); BPD level did not significantly affect these attitudes within the *highly matched* condition (ß = .216, p = .089). Despite a non-significant interaction in the regression model for the sample, these findings are consistent with Hypothesis 2 (*Figure 4*).

Exploratory Analyses

Approach and Avoidance Motivations. I was also interested in the motivations and approaches to unwanted sexual behavior that may be driving a greater tolerance of sexual coercion from a romantic partner. I independently analyzed two sexual motivations: approach and avoidance. The former indicates a person engaging in sexual behavior for positive reasons (e.g., intimacy); the latter denotes using sex to evade negative consequences (e.g., relationship conflict). Neither sexual motivation was affected by condition ($t(128) = -.954$, p = .342; *d* = .17 [*Figure 5*] and $t(128) = -.491$, p = .624; *d* = .08 [*Figure 6*], respectively). Also, BPD traits did not interact with condition to predict approach sexual motivations when using the same regression model as detailed above (ß = .053, p = .666; $\Delta R^2 = .001$ [*Table 5*]). There was, however, a significant interaction in their prediction of avoidance sexual motivations (ß = -.338, p = .006; $\Delta R^2 = .059$ [*Table 6*]). Simple slopes analyses revealed that participants in the *poorly matched* condition reported more avoidance sexual motivations the more BPD traits they endorsed (ß = .284, p = .020). The association between BPD traits and avoidance motivations was

not significant for those in the highly matched condition (ß = -.203, p = .111). These findings indicate that people higher in borderline traits are more willing to engage in unwanted sexual activities to avoid negative consequences, such as conflict or abandonment, if they were in the *poorly matched* condition (*Figure 7*).

Communal and Exchange Approaches. I also looked at two different approaches to normal, healthy sexual behavior: communal and exchange. A communal approach to sexuality emphasizes the well-being of one's partner, while an exchange approach endorses a *quid pro quo* ideology. There was not a significant differences between experimental groups for the communal approach (t(128) = -1.596, p = .113; d = .28 [*Figure 8*]). However, participants in the highly matched condition agreed more with the exchange approach (t(128) = -2.094, p = .038; d = .36 [*Figure 9*]) compared to those in the poorly matched condition. BPD traits did not interact with condition to predict either the communal approach (ß = .013, p = .913; ΔR2 = .000 [*Table 7*]) or the exchange approach (ß = -.072, p = .555; ΔR2 = .003 [*Table 8*]). It is intuitive that a person would be more communal when they are told that they match well with their partner, but to see an increase in the exchange approach was unexpected. The unique main effect of condition that we see for these subscales might be attributed to the fact that this measure was the only one not looking at unwanted sexual behavior. Also, remember that the Exchange Approach for Sexual Relations subscale was not internally consistent (Cronbach's α = .42).

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

How do people respond to threats to their romantic relationships? This study investigated the reactions of female college students to being told that they do not match well with their partner regarding personality. Specifically, it looked at how attitudes toward sexual coercion were affected. These attitudes were consistent across the two groups: *poorly matched* and *highly matched*. However, the manipulation had an effect when looking at individual differences in BPD features. The researcher attempted to prime fear of abandonment—the primary characteristic of BPD—via the *poorly matched* condition. Within this condition, BPD traits significantly predicted attitudes more tolerant of sexual coercion; this was not the case in the *highly matched* condition.

Studies often report that BPD traits are correlated with maladaptive sexual attitudes and behaviors (Bouchard, Sabourin, et al., 2009; Zanarini, 2005), and this study was no different ($r = .330$, $p < .001$). An important implication of my study is that I only found this correlation when relationship quality was threatened; however, when people were told that their relationship quality was better than average, this association disappeared. Thus, the significant correlation between BPD traits and attitudes tolerant of sexual coercion was driven by whether participants' romantic relationships were threatened: this association for women told that they matched in the 11^{th} percentile with

their partner was significant (ß = .464, $p < .001$), while it wasn't significant for those told that they matched in the 89th percentile (ß = .216, $p = .089$). Specifically, for women in the *poorly matched* condition, higher levels of BPD traits were correlated with more tolerant of sexual coercion in five of eight hypothetical situations; in the *highly matched* condition BPD traits only predicted attitudes toward sexual coercion in one of the eight hypothetical situations. These findings are novel and vital in beginning to understand individual differences that affect the oft-found association between BPD and IPV.

When we tested this interaction in a regression model, we found that there may indeed be an interaction between BPD features and fear of abandonment in their ability to explain the variance in attitudes toward sexual coercion. Simple slopes analyses revealed that—as predicted—people in the *poorly matched* condition reported that they were more likely to engage in unwanted sexual activity with their partner the more BPD features they endorsed. This indicates that people higher in BPD traits are vulnerable to sexual coercion when their relationship is threatened. It is important to remember that this is a non-clinical sample. Those individuals whose functioning is significantly impaired by BPD traits (i.e., people with a diagnosis) are even more likely to be affected by a threat to their relationship and thus more likely to be a victim of sexual coercion from their partner. In the *highly matched* condition, people higher in BPD features were no more tolerant of sexual coercion. Thus, a relevant implication of this finding is that highlighting a positive aspect of one's relationship, such as how well they match compared to others, may promote adaptive sexual attitudes and behaviors in people with high levels of BPD features—or at least protect against maladaptive ones.

Furthering our understanding of this interaction, my findings regarding sexual motivations indicate that people higher in BPD features may be more tolerant of sexual coercion when rejection is salient in order to avoid negative outcomes. Avoidance motivations significantly increased with BPD traits in the *poorly matched* condition, while the inverse was the case in the *highly matched* condition. This highlights the frantic attempts to avoid abandonment often endorsed by people high in BPD traits: when the relationship threatened, they do things they may not have otherwise done (e.g., unwanted sexual behavior) in order to avoid further problems (Purdie & Downey, 2000; Bouchard, Sabourin, et al., 2009). These findings echo the clinical anecdote referenced at the start of this paper: "I would rather be physically abused than be alone." They also are in line with other work that demonstrates the negative effects of avoidance-motivated sex. Muise, Impett, and Desmarais (2013) found that avoidance goals for sexual behavior consistently predicted decreases in relationship quality and sexual desire.

Future Directions

Engaging in sex to avoid negative consequences may be the key to understanding why people high in BPD traits are more tolerant of sexual coercion, as the only significant interaction between BPD features and fear of abandonment manipulation was in the prediction of this particular motivation for sexual behavior. The impact of BPD features on attitudes toward sexual coercion may not only vary by situation (i.e., when a relationship is threatened), but this association might vary based on whether a person engages in unwanted sexual behavior to avoid negative consequences. Because the association between BPD traits and avoidance motivations for unwanted sexual behavior

varied by the experimental conditions (i.e., *Table 3* and *Figure 8*), a more complete model might consist of fear of abandonment, BPD traits, avoidance motivations, and the interaction between BPD traits and avoidance motivations. A model of this sort would propose that, when fear of abandonment remains constant, people who are high in borderline traits and who engage in sexual behaviors to avoid negative consequences are significantly more tolerant of sexual coercion from their partner. This model should be tested in future studies. Another intrapersonal feature that might influence the association between BPD traits and maladaptive sexual attitudes is emotion dysregulation.

Overall (i.e., outside of the context of BPD traits), my findings indicate that avoidance sexual motivations are much more highly correlated with attitudes tolerant of sexual coercion than is fear of abandonment. The implication for sexual education in the general population is that people should be discouraged from using sex to avoid negative experiences in their romantic relationships. Abiding by this approach to sexual behavior seems to be a risk factor for engaging in unwanted sexual activity. In a recent study, Muise, Boudreau, & Rosen (2016) found that it is possible to experimentally manipulate people's sexual goals; this significantly affected their feelings of sexual desire and satisfaction. Thus, the potential to create interventions that promote healthy sexual relationships is encouraging.

Limitations

There are a few potential issues in this study that should be considered in future studies and that may have influenced my findings and interpretations. First, the participants did complete this study in a controlled laboratory setting. Attention checks

were not included in the surveys, but they are recommended for future research that is conducted similarly. Second, there was not a true control condition in this study. Thus, I was unable to determine whether there is an association between BPD features and attitudes toward sexual coercion at baseline and whether the conditions significantly differ from a baseline. Third, with 130 participants, this study may be underpowered to find a significant interaction of the appropriate effect size. Similar studies with greater sample sizes would greatly benefit our knowledge of effect sizes when using experimental designs in the scope of BPD and IPV. Finally, the manipulation checks may not have adequately measured whether a fear of abandonment was primed in the *poorly matched* condition. Though the manipulation was successful in altering mood, the conditions did not differ on a pre-/post-test of relationship confidence. There may not have been a change in this latter check due to (1) relationship confidence potentially being a stable trait—especially with participants relationships lasting an average of 17.19 months—or due to (2) participants reacting defensively to being told that they do not match well with their partner.

Strengths

Despite these limitations, my study was novel in that it employed an experimental design within the realms of BPD and sexual coercion. All other studies looking at these two constructs to date have been correlational. My manipulation allowed us to expand the work of others (e.g., Maneta et al., 2013) that indicate an association between BPD and IPV. Also, most of this research compared those with BPD diagnoses to non-clinical samples; my study assessed BPD traits on a continuum to better generalize my findings to

college students. Finally, my study—while addressing the research question at hand—was simultaneously prospective in nature, in that it looked at several motivations for sexual behavior which may be incorporated into future models of why and when individuals high in BPD traits are more tolerant of sexual coercion from their romantic partners.

Conclusions

Situational factors, such as threats to relationship quality, may be key in the association of borderline personality features and intimate partner victimization. The current study extended previous correlational work and demonstrated that it is possible to experimentally strengthen this association by telling people that they do not match well with their romantic partner. Vital to intervention efforts, this study also showed that BPD traits do not predict attitudes tolerant of sexual aggression when the quality of a relationship is emphasized. In addition, people's reasons and motivations for sex have been shown to be an important predictor of relationship quality (Muise, Impett, & Desmarais, 2013). The findings from the present study indicate that these motivations are also crucial in how a person thinks that they would respond to sexual coercion from their partner. Like Muise, Boudreau, and Rosen (2016), I was unable to experimentally manipulate avoidance goals for sexual behavior. However, when taking individual differences (i.e., BPD traits) into account, there were striking differences in the effects of condition. BPD traits predicted attitudes more tolerant of sexual coercion when undergraduate women were told that they matched poorly with their partner in terms of personality, while these same traits predicted attitudes less tolerant of sexual coercion

when people of the same demographics were told that they matched highly. Together, these findings are promising for the development of interventions for people that endorse such traits (e.g., fear of abandonment, interpersonal difficulties, severe mood fluctuations, impulsivity, etc.). The impact of this study's findings on intervention for clinical samples may be restricted to those clients that are able to maintain a steady relationship. Further work on sexual victimization outside of the context of romantic relationships needs to be done in this population.

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APPENDIX A

RESPONSES TO THE IDEA OF ENGAGING IN UNWANTED SEXUAL ACTIVITY WITH A ROMANTIC PARTNER (ADAPTED FROM BASILE, 2002)

8 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = Definitely not; 2 = Probably not; 3 = Maybe; 4 = Probably; 5 = Definitely

For each of the following circumstances, think of your current or most recent partner. Please tell me if you would ever engage in sexual activity (ranging from making out to intercourse) with that person even if you really did not want to:

1. After a romantic situation, such as after a back rub.

2. If you thought s/he expected it from you in return for certain actions, such as spending money on you for a gift or taking you out for a nice dinner.

3. If s/he made you think it is your duty to do so when s/he wants to.

4. If s/he begged and pleaded with you.

5. If s/he suggested s/he would leave you if you did not.

6. If s/he said things to bully/humiliate you.

7. If s/he threatened to hurt you if you did not.

8. If s/he tried to use physical force.

APPENDIX B

DEMOGRAPHICS

Age: _____

Year in School:

Freshman

Sophomore

Junior

Senior

Other: _____

Major: _____

Race (check all that apply):

Asian

Black or African-American

Hispanic or Latino

Native American or Alaskan Native

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

White or Caucasian

Other: _____

I prefer not to say.

Are you currently in a romantic relationship? Yes No

If yes, how many months has your current relationship lasted? _____

Sexual Orientation:

Heterosexual

Homosexual

Other: _____

I prefer not to say.

How do you feel about the status of your current relationship?

Very hesitant

Hesitant

Somewhat hesitant

Neither hesitant nor confidant

Somewhat confident

Confident

Very confident

How would you rate your current mood?

Very negative

Negative

Somewhat negative

Neither negative nor positive

Somewhat positive

Positive

Very positive

APPENDIX C

DEBRIEFING

You have just completed Study XXX: Personality and Romantic Relationships. The purpose of this study is to investigate the associations between personality variables and attitudes toward sexual coercion. Thank you for your time and effort in working through the questionnaires. Your responses are valued and will be used to help us answer important questions about the relationships of college students.
The feedback about your answers was fictitious. You were randomly assigned a percentile told indicated how compatible you are with your partner. Thus, our assessment about how well you two are matched was completely made up. We apologize for any negative feelings this may have caused. This deception was necessary in order to perform this study and measure your reactions.

Please read the following statement and indicate whether you agree with it: "I understand that any feedback given during this study was pretend and does not reflect any truth about my life."

(1) Yes (2) No

Did you suspect this was the case during the study?

(1) Yes, I suspected this was false feedback.
(2) No, I thought it was accurate feedback.

It is important that you do not discuss this study with anybody else until the end of the semester. Please read the following statement and indicate whether you agree to it: "I will not discuss this study with other students until after the end of the semester."

(1) Yes (2) No

Also, your data is not linked with your name in any way. However, if you do not want your data to be used in the study, please let us know.

(1) Yes, you may use my data. (2) No, you may not use my data.

If you were upset by the questions, or any other aspects of your life, we would like to remind you of the free services you can access on campus at the Counseling and Testing Center (336-334-5874) and from the UNCG Sexual Violence Campus Advocate (336-202-4867). If you have any questions about this study or would like a paper copy of the consent form, please email rnglab@uncg.edu.

APPENDIX D

TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

Variable	*M*	*SD*	Range	Cronbach's α
PAI-BOR	27.39	10.77	6 - 59	.70
Sexual Coercion	2.17	.86	1 - 5.25	.78
Approach	9.04	1.56	4.4 - 11	.72
Avoidance	3.93	2.94	1 - 11	.91
Communal	3.87	.79	1.75 - 5	.83
Exchange	2.92	.62	1 – 4.63	.42

Note. N = 130. Actual values for the current study.
PAI-BOR = Personality Assessment Inventory – Borderline Features scale; Sexual Coercion = Responses to the Idea of Engaging in Unwanted Sexual Activity with a Romantic Partner; Approach = Approach Sex Motivation Subscale; Avoidance = Avoidance Sex Motivation Subscale; Communal = Communal Approach to Sexual Relations subscale; Exchange = Exchange Approach to Sexual Relations subscale.

Table 2

T-test for Equality of Means

Variable	Poorly Matched		Highly Matched				
	M	SD	M	SD	*t*-test	*p*	Cohen's *d*
PAI-BOR	27.00	10.83	27.81	10.86	-.427	.670	.07
Sexual Coercion	2.11	.92	2.23	.78	-.759	.449	.14
Approach	8.91	1.81	9.17	1.24	-.954	.342	.17
Avoidance	3.81	2.93	4.06	2.96	-.491	.624	.08
Communal	3.76	.90	3.98	.64	-1.596	.113	.28
Exchange	2.81	.66	3.03	.55	-2.094*	.038	.36

Note. $N = 67$ (poorly matched); $N = 63$ (highly matched).
PAI-BOR = Personality Assessment Inventory – Borderline Features scale; Sexual Coercion = Responses to the Idea of Engaging in Unwanted Sexual Activity with a Romantic Partner; Approach = Approach Sex Motivation Subscale; Avoidance = Avoidance Sex Motivation Subscale; Communal = Communal Approach to Sexual Relations subscale; Exchange = Exchange Approach to Sexual Relations subscale.
*$p < .05$.

Table 3

Bivariate Correlations among Key Study Variables

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. PAI-BOR	—						
2. Condition	.04	—					
3. Sexual Coercion	.36***	.07	—				
4. Approach	.07	.08	.05	—			
5. Avoidance	.05	.04	.36***	.24**	—		
6. Communal	.08	.14	.09	.61***	.12	—	
7. Exchange	.01	.18*	.13	.09	.18*	.25**	—

Note.
PAI-BOR = Personality Assessment Inventory – Borderline Features scale; Sexual Coercion = Responses to the Idea of Engaging in Unwanted Sexual Activity with a Romantic Partner; Approach = Approach Sex Motivation Subscale; Avoidance = Avoidance Sex Motivation Subscale; Communal = Communal Approach to Sexual Relations subscale; Exchange = Exchange Approach to Sexual Relations subscale.
*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

Table 4

MR Analyses of Rejection Manipulation and Borderline Personality Features to Predict Attitudes toward Sexual Coercion

Predictor Variable	ß	B (SE)	*p*-value	ΔR^2
Step 1				
				.126
BPD features	.355***	.028 (.007)	<.001	
Step 2				
				.003
BPD features	.353***	.028 (.007)	<.001	
Condition	.054	.092 (.137)	.519	
Step 3				
				.022
BPD features	.497***	.040 (.009)	<.001	
Condition	.054	.092 (.140)	.512	
BPD X Condition	-.208	-.024 (.013)	.070	

Note. N = 130.

ß = Standardized coefficient; B = Unstandardized coefficient; SE = Standard error; ΔR^2 = Change in percent of variance explained by each step of the model.

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

Table 5

MR Analyses of Rejection Manipulation and Borderline Personality Features to Predict Approach Sexual Motivations

Predictor Variable	ß	B (SE)	*p*-value	ΔR^2
Step 1				
				.004
BPD features	.065	.009 (.013)	.465	
Step 2				
				.008
BPD features	.062	.009 (.013)	.487	
Condition	.082	.254 (.274)	.357	
Step 3				
				.001
BPD features	.025	.004 (.018)	.842	
Condition	.082	.253 (.275)	.359	
BPD X Condition	.053	.011 (.026)	.666	

Note. N = 130.

ß = Standardized coefficient; B = Unstandardized coefficient; SE = Standard error; ΔR^2 = Change in percent of variance explained by each step of the model.

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

Table 6

MR Analyses of Rejection Manipulation and Borderline Personality Features to Predict Avoidance Sexual Motivations

Predictor Variable	ß	B (SE)	*p*-value	ΔR^2
Step 1				
				.002
BPD features	.049	.013 (.024)	.577	
Step 2				
				.002
BPD features	.048	.013 (.024)	.590	
Condition	.042	.243 (.518)	.640	
Step 3				
				.059
BPD features	.282*	.077 (.033)	.020	
Condition	.042	-.247 (.505)	.626	
BPD X Condition	-.338**	-.133 (.047)	.006	

Note. N = 130.

ß = Standardized coefficient; B = Unstandardized coefficient; SE = Standard error; ΔR^2 = Change in percent of variance explained by each step of the model.

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

Table 7

MR Analyses of Rejection Manipulation and Borderline Personality Features to Predict Communal Approach Sexual Motivations

Predictor Variable	ß	B (SE)	*p*-value	ΔR^2
Step 1				
				.007
BPD features	.081	.006 (.006)	.360	
Step 2				
				.018
BPD features	.076	.006 (.006)	.389	
Condition	.137	.215 (.138)	.121	
Step 3				
				.000
BPD features	.066	.005 (.009)	.588	
Condition	.137	.215 (.138)	.123	
BPD X Condition	.013	.001 (.013)	.913	

Note. N = 130.

ß = Standardized coefficient; B = Unstandardized coefficient; SE = Standard error; ΔR^2 = Change in percent of variance explained by each step of the model.

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

Table 8

MR Analyses of Rejection Manipulation and Borderline Personality Features to Predict Exchange Approach Sexual Motivations

Predictor Variable	ß	B (SE)	*p*-value	ΔR^2
Step 1				
				.000
BPD features	.014	.001 (.005)	.870	
Step 2				
				.033
BPD features	.008	.000 (.005)	.931	
Condition	.182*	.224 (.108)	.039	
Step 3				
				.003
BPD features	.058	.003 (.007)	.636	
Condition	.182*	.224 (.108)	.040	
BPD X Condition	-.072	-.006 (.010)	.555	

Note. N = 130.

ß = Standardized coefficient; B = Unstandardized coefficient; SE = Standard error; ΔR^2 = Change in percent of variance explained by each step of the model.

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

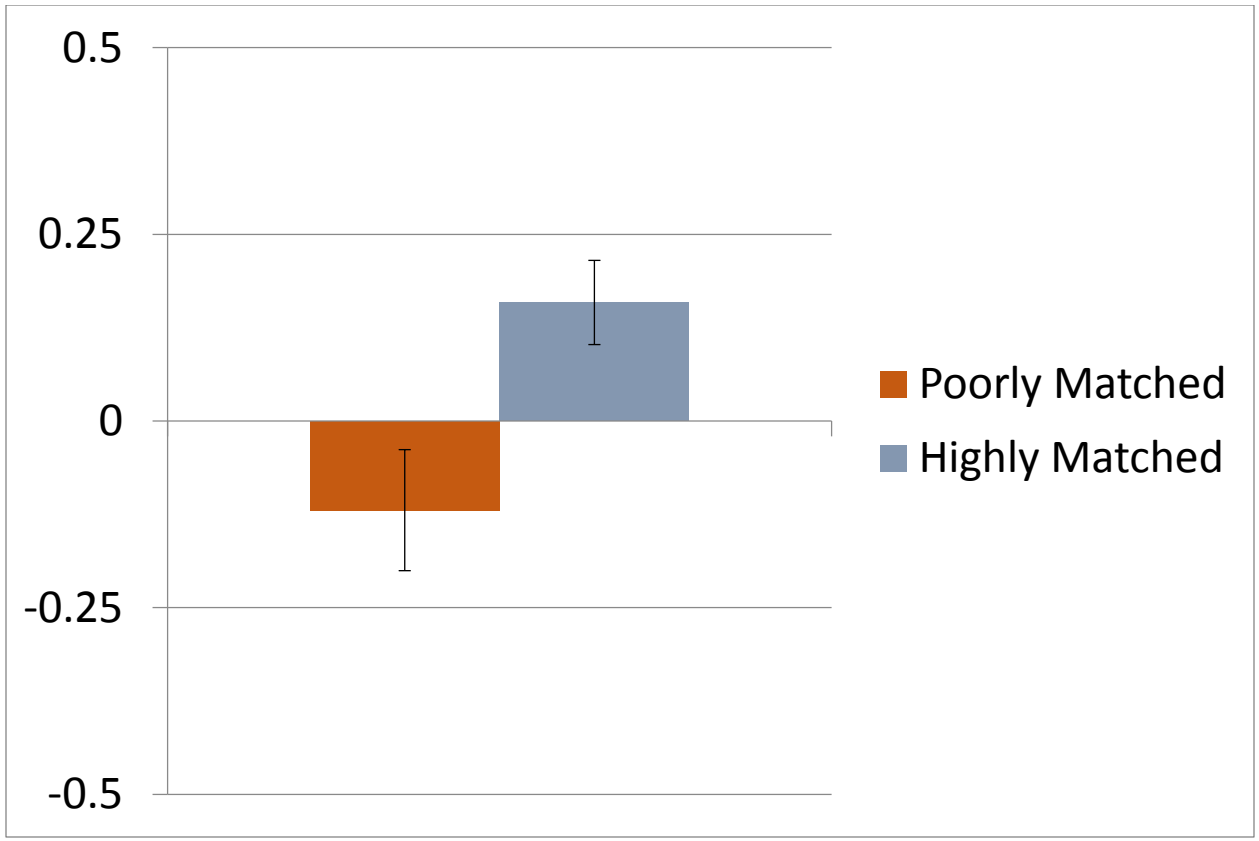

Figure 1. Manipulation Check for Mood

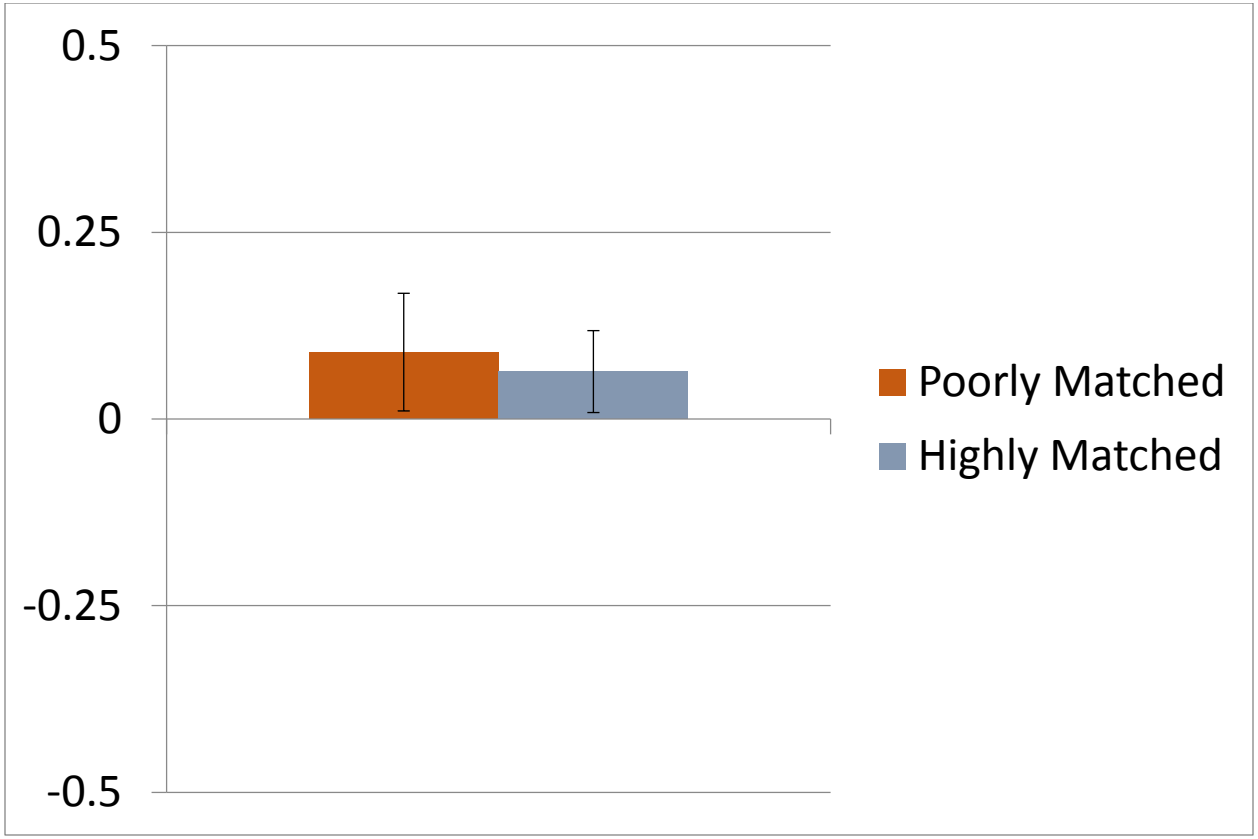

Figure 2. Manipulation Check for Relationship Security.

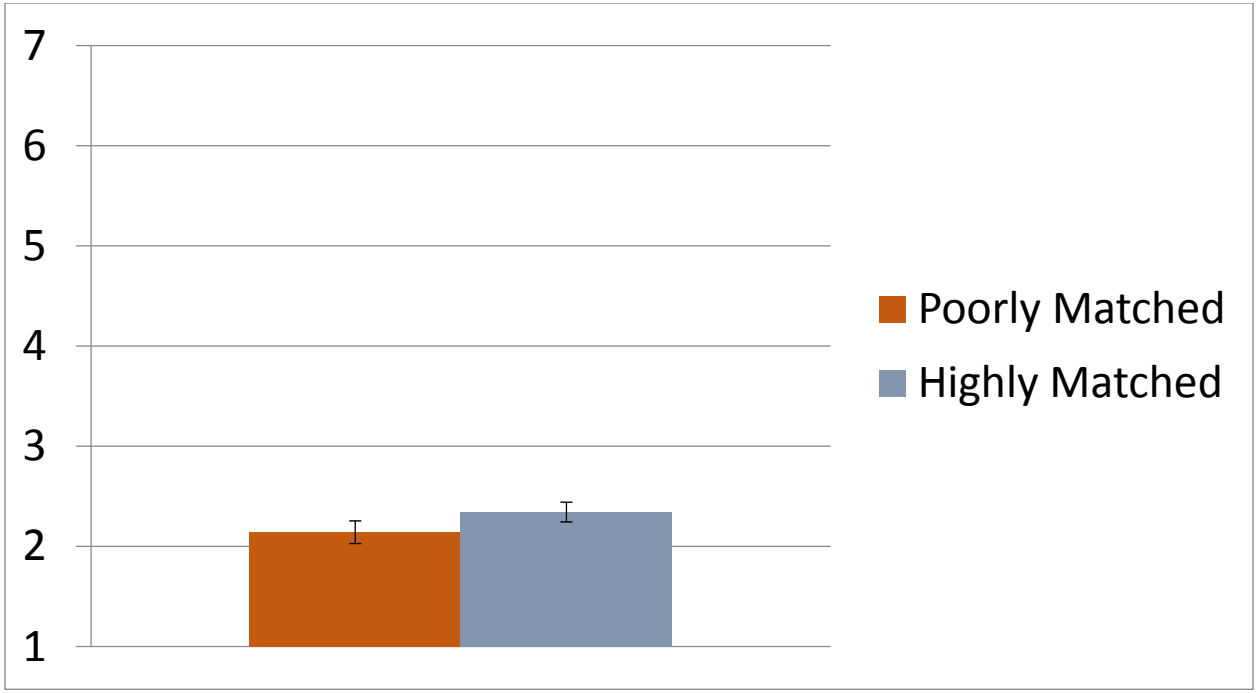

Figure 3. Group Means for Attitudes Tolerant of Sexual Coercion by Condition.

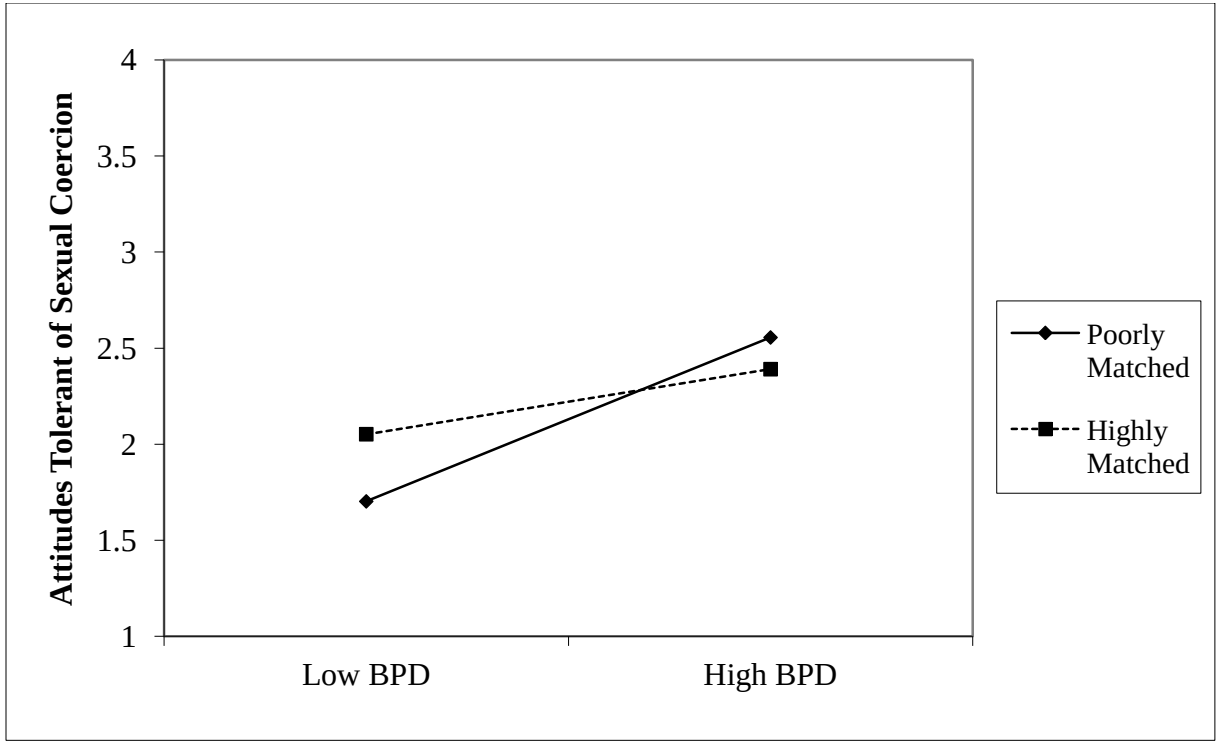

Figure 4. Simple Slopes Analyses for the Interaction of BPD Features and Experimental Condition in the Prediction of Attitudes Tolerant of Sexual Coercion.

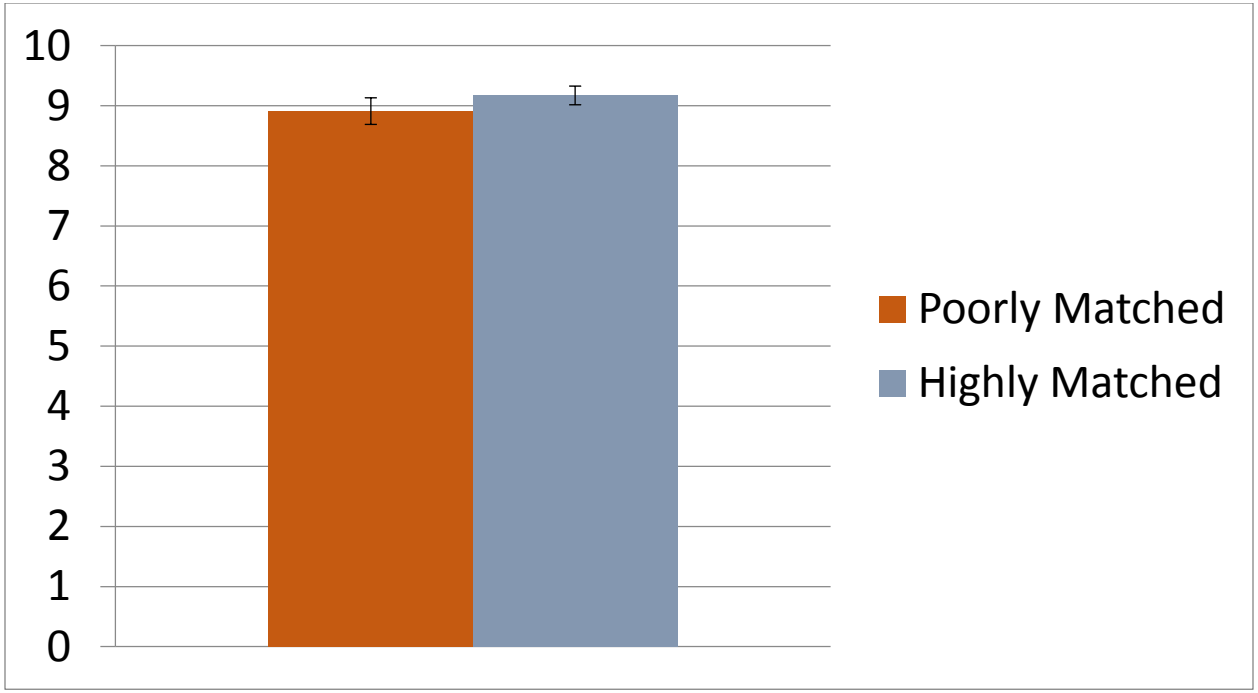

Figure 5. Group Means for Approach Motivations for Sexual Behavior by Condition.

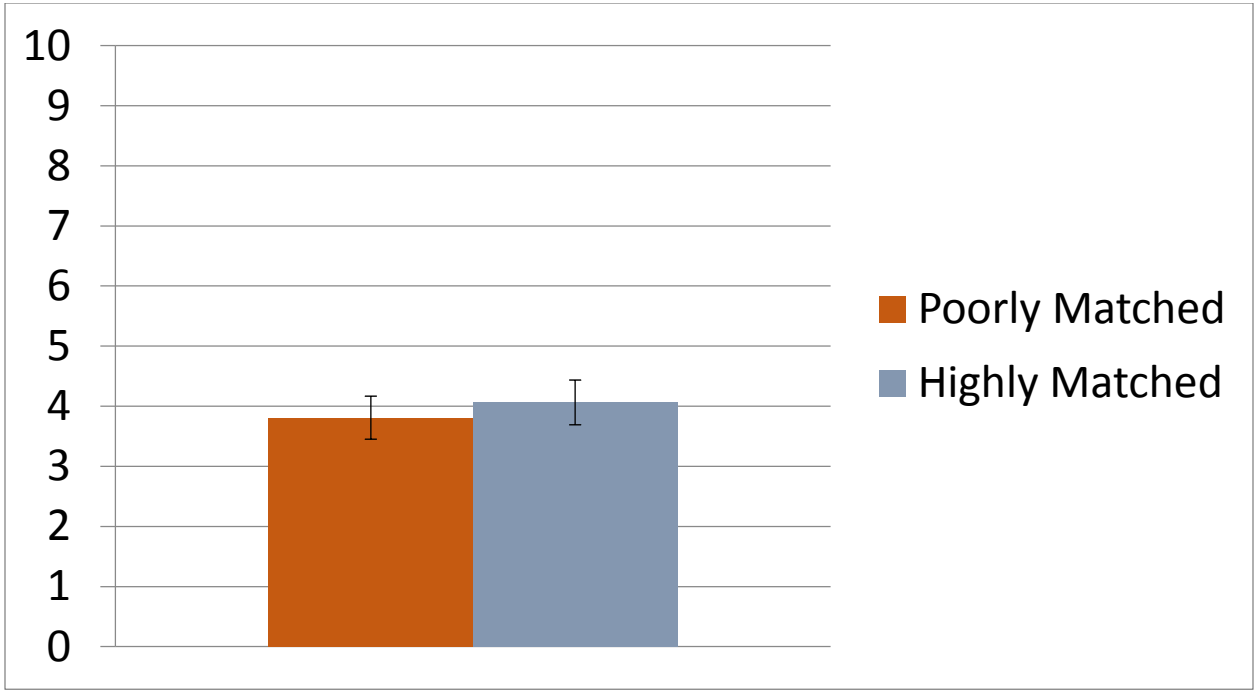

Figure 6. Group Means for Avoidance Motivations for Sexual Behavior by Condition.

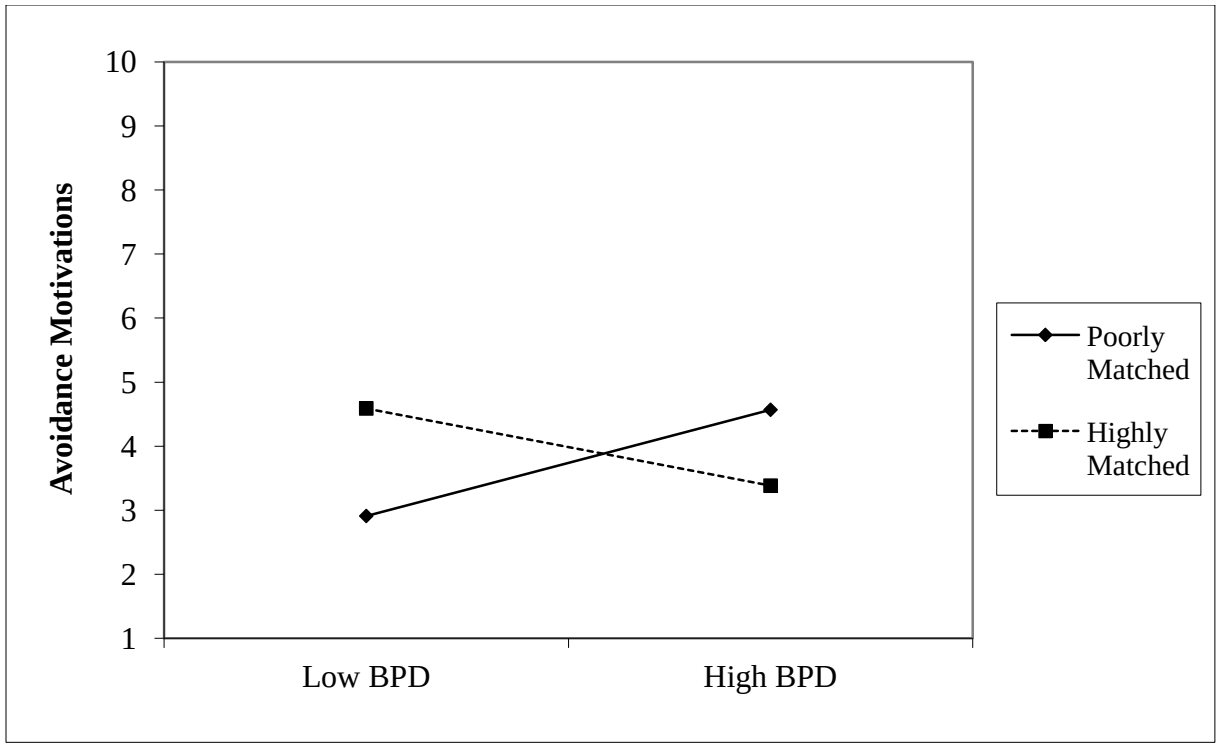

Figure 7. Simple Slopes Analyses for the Interaction of BPD Features and Experimental Condition in the Prediction of Avoidant Motivations for Sexual Behavior.

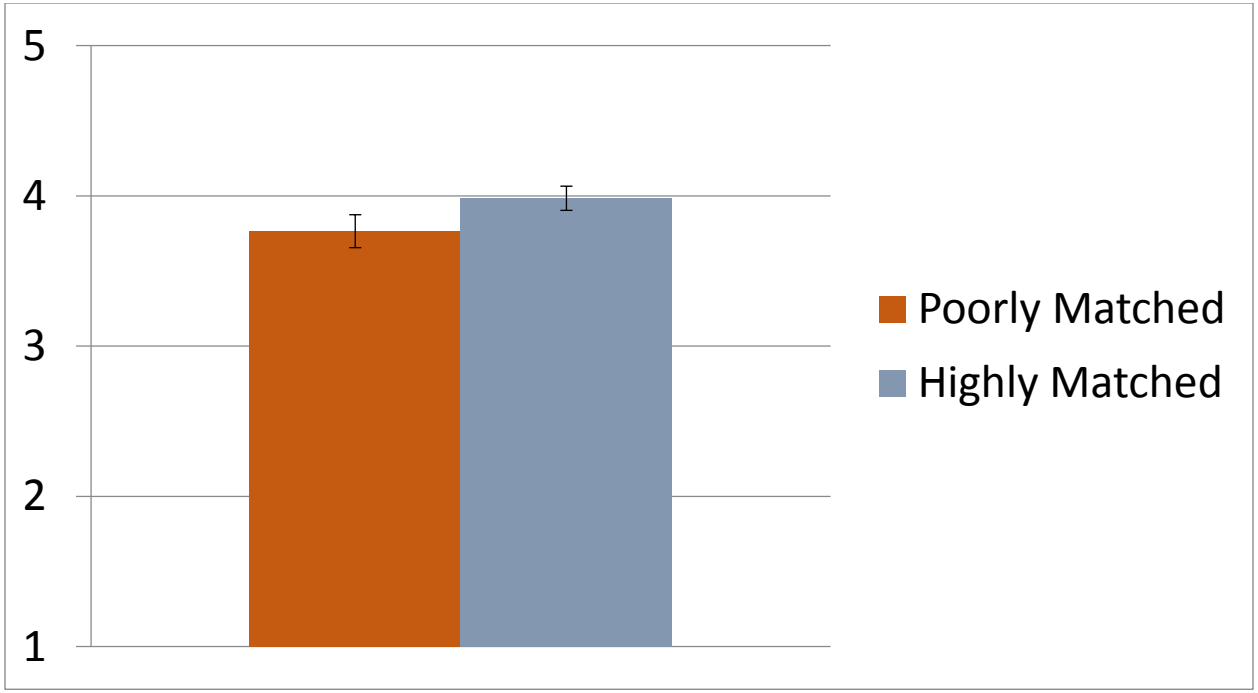

Figure 8. Group Means for Communal Approaches to Sexual Behavior by Condition.

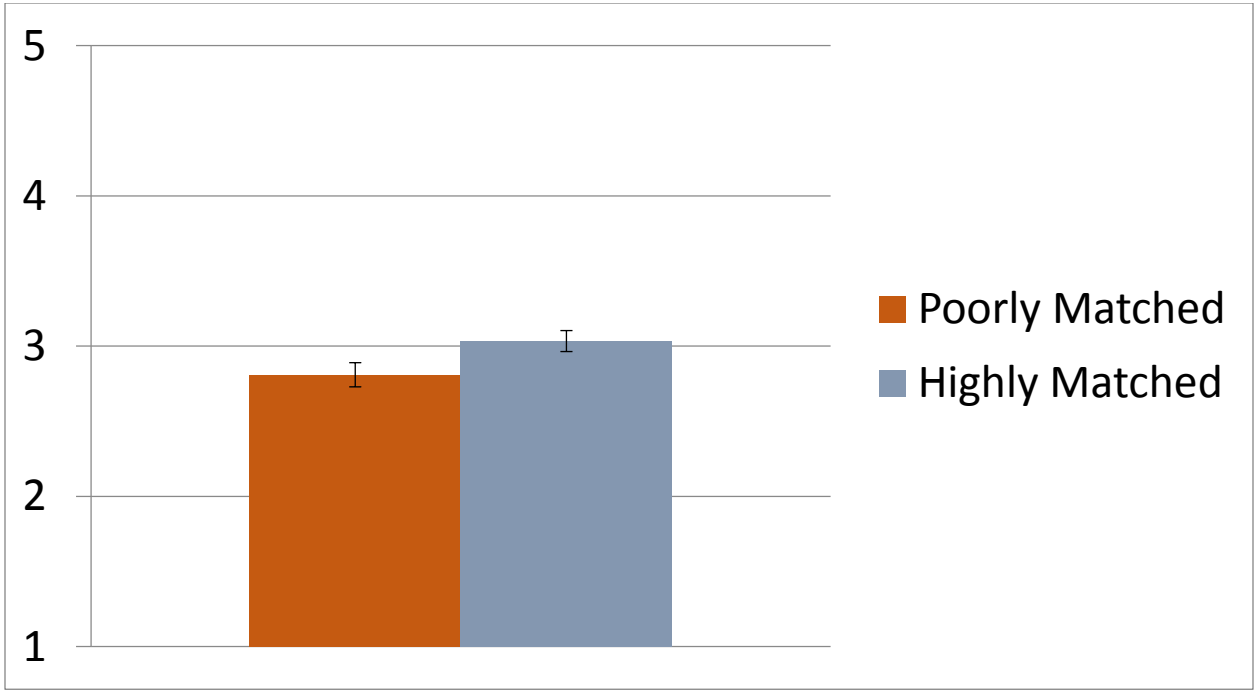

Figure 9. Group Means for Exchange Approaches to Sexual Behavior by Condition.