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Attachment and First Sexual Experience

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Abstract

This investigation examined the relationship between first sexual experience and attachment tendencies. Subjects' first sexual experiences were examined as a function of Bartholomew's four attachment categories: secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). It was hypothesized that if a person's first sexual experience was negative, then he or she would score significantly lower on the secure attachment subscale. Results indicated (a) that college females who had a fearful attachment style were more likely to report that their first sexual partner pressured them into sex, b) that college females who were more dismissing in their attachment style were less likely to have pressured their first sexual partner into sex, and c) that college students who were more fearful in their attachment style were more likely to report having been manipulated into sex by their first sexual partners. The discussion focuses on discrepancies within the study and suggests considerations for future studies.

All humans are born with the ability to form social attachments with another person. Most infants form attachments with their primary caretakers. As they grow and mature, children begin to form models drawn from these early attachments upon which they later base relationships outside the immediate family. It has been shown that if a child's first attachment with the primary caregiver is negative, then later negative attachment styles will develop; whereas, if the attachment is positive, later positive attachment styles will result (Ainsworth, 1989.)

Building upon Bowlby's (1982) definition of attachment as a form of

"affectional bond," Ainsworth goes on to describe affectional bonds as "relatively long-enduring ties in which the partner is important as a unique individual and is interchangeable with none other" (Ainsworth, 1989). Both attachments and affectional bonds are very similar in that they can be characterized by a person as pleasurable, when the person is with another, and distressful, when the person is apart from the other. There is one distinct difference: in affectional bonds, becoming close with another person results in security and comfort, while in an attachment bond, achieving closeness can result in different attachment styles (Ainsworth).

Four attachment style measures developed by Bartholomew (1991) were used as a basis in this study: "secure" is characterized by being comfortable with intimacy, "preoccupied" is characterized by being preoccupied with the attachment pattern due to a need to be accepted, "fearful" is characterized by avoidance of close involvement with others for fear of rejection, and "dismissing" is characterized by a dismissing attitude for fear of disappointment and needing a sense of independence. Though relatively stable, attachment bonds consist of small portions of a larger schema that are continually adjusting according to a person's perceptions of the people they meet and the life experiences (including their first sexual experience) they undergo (Bartholomew & Scharfe, in press).

A major life experience that occurs at some point in the life span is a person's first sexual experience. Previous views of the self (self-esteem, etc.) strongly tend to determine the outcome of a person's first sexual experience. For instance, if a person has a strong, positive feeling about him or herself, then he/she will tend to choose an appropriate time and partner for the sexual experience to occur--making it pleasant. However, if the person has low self-esteem, he or she may not have the tools to appropriately choose such circumstances--leaving negative feelings.

Though a person's ability to make appropriate choices for a first sexual

experience determines the degree of satisfaction in the experience, some people have had the choice taken away (e.g., incest, rape). This lack of choice often leaves a drastic change in many aspects of a person's life, including a person's attachment style. There is a growing body of literature examining the relationship between negative first sexual experience and later characteristics of a person's life. Specifically, studies show that negative first sexual experiences, such as rape or incest, lead to later sexual dysfunctions and relationship problems (Fromuth, 1986; Gold, 1986; Meiselman, 1980; Silbert & Pines, 1983).

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the relationship between attachment tendencies and first sexual experiences. Bettor (1989) has observed that because previous studies on first sexual experience have yielded inconsistent results on some variables, further research needs to be conducted. In her study, she lists some of those variables (such as scarce data on males) and conflicting findings as to whether or not their early sexual experiences have any effect on later attachment styles.

Bartholomew's four attachment ratings (i.e., secure, fearful, preoccupied, and dismissing) were used to analyze the subjects' attachment tendencies and then were compared to reports of the first sexual experience.

It was hypothesized that if subjects' first sexual experience was perceived as negative, then they would report higher ratings in fearfulness, preoccupation, and dismissiveness.

Method

Subjects

The subjects in the present research were drawn from several lower division psychology classes at a small Midwestern university. The sample consisted of 54 subjects (26 males, 28 females) who were assessed during the spring of 1994. Approximately 11.1% were of the age 16-18, 50.0% were 19-21, 11.1% were 22-24, 7.4% were 25-27, and

20.4% were 28 or older. The academic levels of the students were 40.7% freshmen, 37.0% sophomores, 9.3% juniors, and 13.0% seniors. Percentages for marital status were 72.2% never married, 14.8% currently in first marriage, 9.3% divorced, and 3.7% remarried. Subjects reported that 79.6% had no children, 3.7% had one child, 14.8% had two to three children, and 1.9% had four to five children. The ethnic heritage characteristics of the participants were 5.6% African-American, 92.6% Caucasian-American, and 1.9% other. The subjects volunteered to participate in this study by choosing from a variety of research projects, as required to earn credit counting toward their final course grade.

Measures

Relationship Scales Questionnaire. The four attachment subscales were measured by Bartholomew's Relationship Scales Questionnaire (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991). The self-report survey consisted of 31 items which were answered on a 3-point Likert scale of A = "Not at all like me," B = "Somewhat like me," and C = "Very much like me." The mean reliability scores for Bartholomew's questionnaire were, for females, .53 (range = .45 to .58) and for males, .49 (range = .39 to .58) (Bartholomew & Sharfe, in press).

First Sexual Experience. Several ad hoc items were constructed to measure aspects of subjects' first sexual experience. The items constructed assessed such variables as the age of first sexual experience, who it was with (e.g., a family member, neighbor), and whether it was considered to be abuse. Six individual items were specifically written to measure abusive, first sexual experience: (1) did your first sexual partner pressure you into having sexual intercourse; (2) did your first sexual partner manipulate you into having sexual intercourse; (3) did your first sexual partner force you into having sexual intercourse; (4) did you pressure your first sexual partner into having

sexual intercourse; (5) did you manipulate your first sexual partner into having sexual intercourse; (6) did you force your first sexual partner into having sexual intercourse. Subjects responded to those six statements by indicating yes (scored as 1) or no (scored as 0), thus higher scores corresponded to greater abuse during initial sexual experiences.

Procedure

Upon arrival, subjects were asked to sit with a row of seats between them, not to talk during the study, and to read and sign an informed consent sheet. They were guaranteed complete anonymity and were assured that their responses would be kept in complete confidence. All subjects who entered the study agreed to participate. Each subject then received a questionnaire booklet containing the various measures, presented in the same order as described above.

Following completion of the measures, the subjects received a written debriefing form that explained the purpose of the study. The completion of the questionnaire booklet required approximately 40-45 minutes. Groups of up to ten subjects were tested during each session. There was a total of five sessions, two for females and three for males.

Results

The correlations between the attachment styles and first sexual experience variables are presented in Table 1. This table indicates that among females a significant positive relationship between the fearful attachment style and first sexual partner pressuring sex, $r = .48, p < .05$; males, $r = .35, p < .05$; both, $r = .39, p < .05$. Among the combined group of males and females, there was a significant positive relationship between fearful attachment style and first sexual partner manipulating the subject for sex, $r = .25, p < .05$. Among females, there was a negative correlation between a dismissing attachment style and having pressured one's first sexual partner into sex, $r = -.40,$

$p < .05$.

Table 1

Correlations between the Attachment Tendencies and First Sexual Experiences

First Sexual Experiences	Attachment Tendencies			
	Secure	Preoccupied	Fearful	Dismissive
Age at first sex:				
Males	.09	.02	.03	-.09
Females	-.18	-.31	.06	.07
Both	-.03	-.14	.05	-.02
First sex partner pressure you?				
Males	.19	.23	.35 ^a	-.06
Females	.12	.01	.48 ^a	.04
Both	.19	.12	.39 ^a	-.05
First sex partner manipulate you?				
Males	-.02	.17	.24	-.00
Females	.30	.25	.29	-.15
Both	.13	.21	.25 ^a	-.09
First sex partner force you?				
Males	-.24	-.14	-.23	-.31
Females	.24	-.16	.05	-.07
Both	.11	-.12	-.05	-.19
You pressure first sex partner?				
Males	-.25	-.12	.12	-.07
Females	.16	-.01	-.27	-.40 ^a
Both	-.17	-.09	.01	-.11
You manipulate first sex partner?				
Males	-.07	-.22	-.20	-.07
Females	-.14	.10	.07	.00
Both	-.13	-.13	-.10	-.00
You force first sex partner?				
Males	--	--	--	--
Females	--	--	--	--
Both	--	--	--	--

Note. See text for a description of the instruments. "--" indicates that the correlation could not be computed because of zero variability on the sexual experience item. ^a $p < .01$; ^b $p < .01$; ^c $p < .005$; ^d $p < .001$.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between attachment and first sexual experience. It was hypothesized that if a person's first sexual experience was perceived as negative, then that individual would be characterized by a less secure attachment tendency due to the reactions of guilt and loss of self-esteem. Similarly, it was anticipated that such individuals would report greater fearfulness, preoccupation, and dismissfulness.

The results did not support the hypothesis that there would be an association between a negative first sexual experience and low ratings in security. However, as predicted, an association was found between fearful attachment and a negative first sexual experience.

Although no significant findings emerged for the preoccupied attachment style, for the dismissing attachment style, a strong correlation was found among the females. This finding indicated that the greater dismissing attachment style a female had, the less likely she was to have pressured her first sexual partner into sex.

Individuals whose first sexual experience involved being pressured or manipulated into sex expressed an attachment style of fearfulness. This finding is similar to previous studies' discovery that a negative first sexual experience is correlated with negative consequences (Gold, 1986). Also, females who were more dismissing in their attachment style were found to be less likely to have pressured their first sexual partner into sex. This finding coincides with the idea that in a fearful state of being a person afraid of sex would be dismissing of it (Bettor, 1989).

The current findings do have some implications for clinicians. Analyzing the attachment style of clients and then determining possible determinants of that attachment style could help to find roots of various relationship and sexual problems. Of course, because first sex is not the only major life event, other events must be analyzed also--such as death of loved ones and socio-economic factors.

Several limitations of the current research need to be mentioned. This study only measured current attachment styles; the attachment styles before the first sexual experience must be determined in order to assess any change in attachment style that there may have been. Also, first sexual intercourse was the only variable directly asked about in the current research study; otherwise, the term "sexual experience" was used. Past studies have also examined, but not clearly defined, exactly what is being meant by the concept of "first sexual experience" and "sexual relations." In this study, the possibility that some individuals may tend to predispose themselves to bad relationship experiences due to other factors than the perception of first sexual intercourse was not assessed. Likewise, the determination

of what a negative and positive sexual experience is, had not been defined, only assumed; when in reality, different people can view the same kind of experience as positive or negative.

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Author Notes

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