



Does Increased Sexual Frequency Enhance Happiness?[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Prior research observing a positive correlation between happiness and sexual frequency has not been able to determine whether increased frequency leads, causally, to an increase in happiness. We present results from the first experimental study to address the question of causality. We recruited couples and randomly assigned half to double their frequency of intercourse. We find that increased frequency does not lead to increased happiness, perhaps because it leads to a decline in wanting for, and enjoyment of, sex.

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1. Introduction

Considerable scientific research has observed a link between sexual frequency and well-being. One analysis of a representative sample of 16,000 adult Americans found that sexual frequency was a strong positive predictor of self-reported happiness (Blanchflower and Oswald, 2004). Similar results were also obtained with a sample of 3800 adults from China (Cheng and Smyth, 2015): Increased frequency (as well as higher reported quality of sex) was associated with greater happiness. In another study of 1000 women who reported daily how they allocated time between activities and how much they enjoyed those activities, sex was rated as the activity producing the greatest amount of happiness (Kahneman et al., 2004; see, also Grimm et al., 2014). A nationally representative survey of 3432 Americans found that individuals with no sexual partners in the past 12 months had the lowest levels of happiness (Laumann et al., 1994). Individuals who report more active sexual relationships also report greater happiness within their relationship (Heiman et al., 2011; Rosen and Bachmann, 2008).

These and similar findings have led to numerous media recommendations to increase sexual frequency. Yet all of the work on the link between sexual frequency and happiness has been correlational, making it impossible to infer a causal link between the two, let alone determine which way the causality runs. Although it seems plausible that sex could have beneficial effects on happiness, it is equally plausible that happiness affects sex, or that some third variable, such as health, affects both. As Blanchflower and Oswald (2004, p. 394) note, “solving the endogeneity problem – working out whether sex causes happiness or causality runs in the reverse direction – will be particularly difficult here.”

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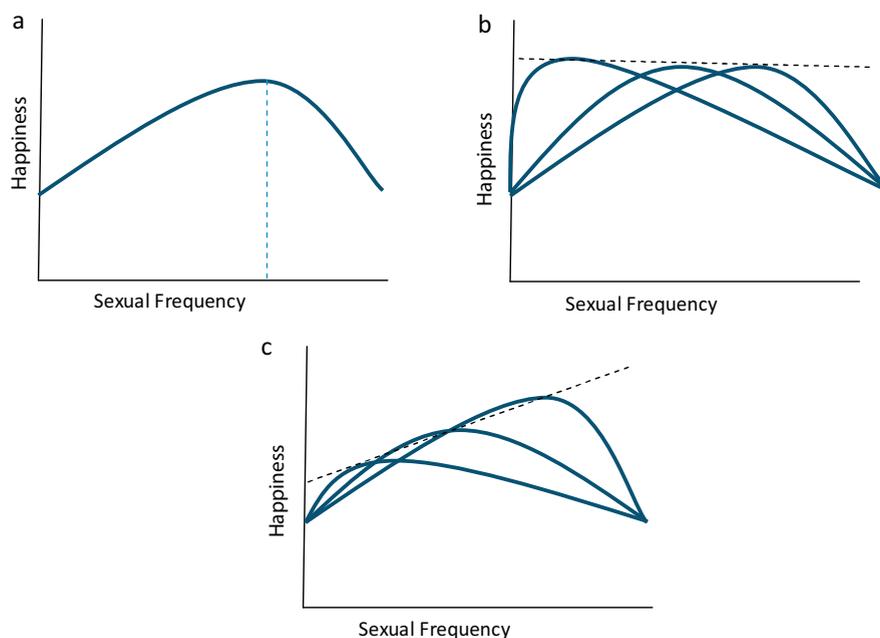


Fig. 1. (a) Hypothetical relationship between happiness and sexual frequency for a single couple. (b) No relationship between happiness-maximizing frequency and happiness. (c) Positive relationship between happiness-maximizing frequency and happiness.

We present findings from a study intended to meet the challenge posed by Blanchflower and Oswald – to test whether sexual frequency has a causal effect on happiness. We recruited couples who were willing to change their patterns of sexual behavior, and randomly assigned half to be asked to double their sexual intercourse frequency.

Although we were successful in increasing frequency among those asked to do so, we did not find that increasing sexual frequency improved happiness. We do not conclude, however, that there is no causal relationship running from sexual frequency to happiness. While there very well may be a causal relationship between sexual frequency and happiness, our experimental manipulation of frequency had an unintended adverse effect on the quality of sex. We exploit the richness of our dataset to explore possible reasons for this perverse and unintended effect.

1.1. Why increased frequency might or might not improve happiness

In making predictions about the relationship between frequency and happiness it is important to distinguish between endogenous (i.e., chosen by the couple) and exogenous (in this case induced by experimental instruction) variations in frequency. If couples choose their own frequency of intercourse in a fashion that maximizes their happiness (corresponding to the dotted line in Fig. 1a), then either a decrease or increase in frequency would lead to a decrease in happiness. Moving away from the chosen frequency of intercourse, according to the traditional account, should always be undesirable, even if happiness is increasing in frequency between 0 – i.e. never having sex – and the optimum. If couples choose their own frequency to maximize their utility, we should not expect a cross-sectional investigation of the relationship between sexual frequency and happiness (as examined in the studies just discussed) to uncover the causal relationship between sexual frequency and happiness. Instead, such a comparison examines only relative happiness levels at different self-determined optima – i.e., whether couples who enjoy more frequent sex are also happier overall. Fig. 1b and c illustrates situations in which one would observe either a flat (Fig. 1b) or (as observed in the literature) positive (Fig. 1c) relationship between happiness and frequency for couples that optimize happiness when determining intercourse frequency.

All of this assumes that couples do engage in sex at their happiness-maximizing level of frequency, which, as discussed in Loewenstein (1996, p. 287), may not be the case. When couples are first together, the simple sight of, or physical contact with, the partner produces arousal, so it takes no stretch of the imagination to recognize how pleasurable sex would be. Very likely for that reason, frequency tends to be high in the early stages of a relationship (Michael et al., 1994). As couples spend time together, however, they naturally tend to adapt to one-another's presence, so that visual and tactile contact results in reduced levels of desire.¹ Combining this decline in desire with the difficulty that people have in bridging emotional states (Loewenstein, 1996) – in imagining what it would be like to be in an affective state different from the one they are in – it is

¹ Such a diminishment in arousal can be understood in evolutionary terms, and may be related to the instant rejuvenated caused by the prospect of sex with a new partner known as the “Coolidge Effect” (see, e.g., Dewsbury, 1981), which has been observed in species as primitive as the pond snail (Koene and Ter Maat, 2007).

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