



# Attachment style and sexual permissiveness: The moderating role of gender

Susan Sprecher\*

Department of Sociology & Anthropology, Illinois State University, Normal, IL, USA  
 Department of Psychology, Illinois State University, Normal, IL, USA

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## ABSTRACT

An individual difference variable that has been found to predict variation in young adults' sexual attitudes and behaviors is attachment orientation. Although it has been argued that the association between attachment orientation and sexuality may differ for males and females, only a few studies have explored this possibility, and the results have been inconsistent. With data collected from a large sample ( $N = 4246$ ) of college students at a U.S. Midwestern University, it was examined how men and women with different attachment styles may vary in sociosexuality and attitudes toward casual sex. This study found evidence that among men, and as hypothesized, a dismissive-avoidant attachment orientation was associated with higher scores on Simpson and Gangestad's (1991) Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (sociosexuality) and on a measure of approval of sex in casual dating relationships. Among women, however, there was no support found for the hypothesis that an anxious-preoccupied attachment style was associated with greater sexual permissiveness or with approval of casual sex. As hypothesized, however, securely attached women had a lower score on sociosexuality than did women with other attachment styles.

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## 1. Introduction

Most young, unmarried adults in the U.S. today are sexually active (McAnulty & Cann, 2012). Nonetheless, there is variation among young adults in sexual permissiveness (Perlman & Sprecher, 2012; Tolman & McClelland, 2011). Some young adults are very sexually permissive and have many sexual partners including through hookup experiences (e.g., Owen, Fincham, & Moore, 2011). At the other end of the continuum are those who are restrictive and elect to abstain until a very committed stage, possibly marriage. Various individual difference variables are predictive of young adults' sexual attitudes and behaviors. One strong predictor is gender. Males have consistently been found to be more sexually permissive and to be more approving of casual sex than females (e.g., Petersen & Hyde, 2011). Another individual difference variable that has been considered recently for its association with sexuality is attachment style or orientation (Cooper et al., 2006; Feeney & Noller, 2004; Gillath & Schachner, 2006). The purpose of this study was to examine how young adults' attachment style is associated with their sexual standards and behaviors, and how these associations may differ for males versus females.

According to attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1973; Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988), people have working models, which are positive or negative beliefs about themselves and others. These

working models develop based on early childhood experiences, but also influence and are influenced by current social interactions and relationships. If interactions with important attachment figures are available and responsive, the working models are positive and a sense of security develops. Beginning with Hazan and Shaver's (1987) theoretical and empirical extension of attachment to adult relationships, the identification of differences in relationship phenomena based on individuals' attachment orientations has become one of the most prolific areas of research in relationship science (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). Research (for reviews, see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2006) has demonstrated that secure attachment is associated with positive relationship outcomes, including stability, satisfaction, self-disclosure, trust, support, and other intimate behaviors. Anxious attachment has been found to be associated with dissatisfaction, conflict, a high breakup rate, an obsessive-passionate love, an inappropriate level of self-disclosure, being demanding of one's partner, endorsing dysfunctional beliefs, and extreme jealousy. Avoidant or dismissing attachment has been found to be associated with a lower level of intimacy and self-disclosure, a higher breakup rate, and a decreased likelihood of falling in love and remaining committed.

Although considerable research has examined how attachment orientations are associated with a variety of relationship behaviors and outcomes, less research has examined how attachment is associated with sexual behaviors and attitudes. Over a decade ago, Bogaert and Sadava (2002, p. 198) wrote "surprisingly little research has been conducted on attachment and sexuality." Even re-

\* Tel.: +1 309 438 8357.

E-mail address: [sprecher@ilstu.edu](mailto:sprecher@ilstu.edu)

cently, in a review article on the sex-attachment link, Dewitte (2012, p. 106) claimed that “the number of (empirical) articles on the interplay between sex and attachment is still limited.”

The research that has been done linking attachment to sexuality has often taken a relational perspective, with a focus on how attachment is associated with the sexual aspect of existing relationships. Not surprisingly, this research indicates that secure attachment orientation is associated with positive sexual experiences, including more frequent and satisfying sex and having sex to express love to one’s partner. Insecure attachment is associated with negative outcomes such as less frequent and less satisfying sex and more negative emotions during sex (e.g., Birnbaum, 2007; Birnbaum, Reis, Mikulincer, Gillath, & Orpaz, 2006; Bogaert & Sadava, 2002; Brassard, Shaver, & Lussier, 2007; Tracy, Shaver, Albino, & Cooper, 2003).

Another line of research, and the one that this study extends, is on how attachment orientations are associated with individuals’ sexual attitudes and overall sexual behaviors. Although research on this topic is not abundant, findings have accumulated to show distinct differences in sexuality based on attachment style or dimensions. Secure attachment has been found to be associated with the belief that sex should occur in the context of relationships, having fewer partners, and the decreased likelihood of participating in hookups and extra-dyadic relationships (e.g., Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Cooper, Shaver, & Collins, 1998; Hazan, Zeifman, & Middleton, 1994, as reported in Paul, McManus, & Hayes, 2000; Tracy et al., 2003). This pattern of sexuality would be consistent with the theory’s characterization of securely attached people as valuing emotional intimacy. Avoidant attachment has been found to be associated with greater acceptance of and engagement in casual sex (Brennan & Shaver, 1995; Feeney, Noller, & Patty, 1993; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Simpson & Gangestad, 1989, as reported in Simpson & Gangestad, 1991). Avoidant individuals’ interest in casual sex can be a strategy used to avoid intimacy. The other way that avoidantly attached individuals can avoid intimacy is to not have sex, which may be a common strategy used during adolescence when sexual activity has not yet become normative (Brassard et al., 2007; Cooper et al., 1998; Tracy et al., 2003). Attachment researchers have argued that people high on anxious attachment, because of their intense intimacy needs, may be willing to have sex even when they do not desire it, for the purpose of initiating or maintaining a relationship and to avoid being rejected. For example, research has shown that anxious-attachment is associated with participating in unwanted sex (Feeney, Peterson, Gallois, & Terry, 2000; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004) and with early sexual intercourse and more partners (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002).

The effect of anxious attachment and avoidant attachment on individuals’ sexuality, however, may differ for males and females (e.g., Bogaert & Sadava, 2002; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004). As noted above, considerable research has shown that men report greater acceptance of casual sex than women. Conversely, women are more focused on emotional intimacy of sex than men (e.g., Petersen & Hyde, 2011). As a consequence, and as cogently argued by Bogaert and Sadava (2002), “attachment and its various links to sexuality may depend on men’s strategy/role of being initiators and women’s strategy/role of being ‘gatekeepers’” (p. 195).

More specifically, the association between anxious-attachment and sexuality should be stronger for women than for men (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004). Anxiously attached females may give into their male partners’ pressure to have sex in order not to be rejected. Indeed, in some research, anxiously attached females, relative to other females, have been found to begin sex at an earlier age (Bogaert & Sadava, 2002; Cooper et al., 2006; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004), have higher scores on erotophilia and other positive attitudes toward casual sex (Allen & Baucom, 2004; Bogaert & Sadava, 2002), have more sexual experience (Tracy et al., 2003),

and have more partners outside of a primary relationship (Ganges-tad & Thornhill, 1997). The same associations are not as strong or are nonexistent for men. In fact, Feeney et al. (1993) found that anxiety attachment was associated with less sexual activity among men (similar results were found in Hazan et al., 1994, as reported in Feeney & Noller, 2004).

Although gender differences in the effects of avoidant attachment on sexuality have been less frequently discussed in the literature, Gentzler and Kerns (2004) made the argument that avoidant attachment should be more strongly associated with sexual permissiveness for men than for women. The argument was that because men are less likely to link sex and love than women, male avoidants may be especially likely to approve of casual sex and be sexually permissive. Gentzler and Kerns (2004) found, however, that avoidant attachment was associated with acceptance of casual sex for both men and women, approximately equally.

### 1.1. The present study

The moderating influence of gender on the association between attachment orientations and sexual attitudes and behaviors has been examined in only a few prior studies, and the results have not been consistent. Furthermore, some of the samples (e.g., Feeney et al., 1993; Gentzler & Kerns, 2004; Schachner & Shaver, 2004) have been relatively small, which reduces the number of participants within each gender who could be characterized as having insecure attachments. Most of the research conducted on the attachment-sexuality link has used multiple-item measures of attachment (e.g., Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) and examined how two continuous dimensions – avoidant attachment and anxious attachment – are associated with sexuality (e.g., Brassard et al., 2007). In some of the studies (e.g., Feeney et al., 1993), however, the categorical approach of discrete attachment styles, either Hazan and Shaver’s (1987) three-category model or Bartholomew and Horowitz’s (1991) four-category model, has been used. The data collection for this study began in 1997, when the category model of discrete attachment styles was more commonly used. This study used the Bartholomew’s four-category model, which assesses how people vary in level of anxiety and avoidance: secure (low anxiety, low avoidance), preoccupied (high anxiety, low avoidance), dismissing (low anxiety, high avoidance), and fearful (high anxiety, high avoidance).

I examine how attachment is related to two common measures of sexual permissiveness. The first is Simpson and Gangestad’s (1991) Sociosexual Orientation Inventory (SOI), which assesses how restrictive versus unrestrictive people are in their sexuality and includes both attitudinal and behavioral items. Second, I used a measure that emerged out of the sociological literature (e.g., Reiss, 1964; Sprecher, McKinney, Walsh, & Anderson, 1988), the Pre-marital Sexual Permissiveness Scale. More specifically, I focused on the items that assess approval of sex during casual dating<sup>1</sup>.

Based on Attachment theory and the limited research linking attachment to sexuality, the hypotheses are:

*H1:* Among men, those who have a dismissive/avoidant style will have higher scores on sociosexuality and be more accepting of sex in casual relationships than will men with any of the other attachment styles. No differences are expected between men with other attachment styles.

*H2:* Among women, those who have an anxious-preoccupied attachment style will have higher scores on sociosexuality and be more accepting of sex in casual relationships than will women with any other attachment style. Furthermore, among women,

<sup>1</sup> Although the scale also assesses standards about sex for serious stages of relationships (seriously dating, engaged), most young adults approve of sex during the seriously dating and engaged stages (i.e., little variance).

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