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## RESEARCH

# Sexual desire and the style of conjugal interactions<sup>☆</sup>

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### KEYWORDS

Sexual desire;  
Sexual satisfaction;  
Sexuality;  
Partnership;  
Marital interaction;  
Marital intimacy

**Summary** Sexual desire dysfunctions are generally considered to be the result of psycho-relational or medical issues. However, various studies suggest that sexual intimacy is linked to conjugal functioning stemming from partners' social statuses. Based on a representative sample of individuals aged between 25 and 45 years old, this study tests the hypothesis that sexual desire is lower in the case of conjugal interaction styles that depreciate partners' autonomy and reinforce conjugal closure and gender disparity. Results confirm this hypothesis. Sexual desire varies according to individuals' autonomy within their partnerships, along with conjugal closure reinforcement and the level of legitimacy conceded to gender inequality. Sexual desire does not have the same importance in every interaction style. This observation has consequences for sexual satisfaction.

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## Introduction

Many psycho-medical studies consider the lack of sexual desire to be caused by sexual or conjugal dissatisfactions (Hartman and Daly, 1983; Hawton et al., 1991; Hayes et al., 2008; Trudel, 2003). Interestingly, most of those studies are based on samples of individuals suffering from sexual dysfunction. From a broader perspective, one might think that sexuality has unequal importance among couples depending on the ways in which people socially organize their intimate relationships (Bozon, 2005; de Singly, 2011; Girardin et al.,

2005; Kaufmann, 1993; Kellerhals et al., 2004; Widmer et al., 2003, 2004a, b, c). Conjugal interaction styles should be therefore taken into account and approached from a sociological perspective when examining the link between sexual desire and conjugal satisfaction. This study aims to complete psycho-medical studies (Hartman and Daly, 1983; Hawton et al., 1991; Trudel et al., 1999; Trudel, 2003; Tremblay, 1995) by emphasizing the effect of social factors on framing sexual desires in relation to the micro sociological dimension of conjugal interactions.

## Sexual desire and conjugal interactions

The impact of social dimensions on sexuality and sexual desire has been stressed by several studies (Laumann et al., 1994; Regan and Bersheid, 1995; Tremblay, 1995; Althof et al., 2005; Basson, 2005; Green, 2008b). Indeed, social norms, life experiences, and attitudes toward sexuality frame both sexual conduct and the frequency of sexual desire (Green, 2008a, b; Laumann et al., 1994; Regan and

DOI of original article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sexol.2013.05.003>.

<sup>☆</sup> La version en français de cet article, publiée dans l'édition imprimée de la revue, est également disponible en ligne: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sexol.2013.05.003>.

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1158-1360/\$ - see front matter © 2013 Published by Elsevier Masson SAS.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sexol.2013.05.001>

Please cite this article in press as: Ammar N, Widmer ED. Sexual desire and the style of conjugal interactions. Sexologies (2013), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.sexol.2013.05.001>

Bersheid, 1999). Therefore, sexual practices and sexual desire may vary according to the ways in which conjugal roles and conjugal intimacy are constructed (Brenot, 2003, 2011, 2012). Some partners give great importance to the similarity of values and the sharing of time and activities. For those partners, similarity means harmony and conjugal happiness (Kellerhals, 1982; de Singly, 1987). To the contrary, other couples are more focused on preserving the autonomy of each partner (de Singly, 2009). This focus justifies personal fulfillment and self-affirmation as a central function of conjugal intimacy. It should, however, be noticed that the development of autonomy and self-affirmation is correlated with conjugal dissatisfaction and shorter partnership durations (Kellerhals et al., 2004). Though the negative effect of partner autonomy on conjugal satisfaction has been shown in several studies, its effect on sexual practices and desire has hardly been examined. Gender equality is another dimension of partnerships that needs to be further studied. Some studies have observed greater conjugal satisfaction in couples who maintain equal gender-role distribution (Bozon, 2001, 2005; Houts et al., 1996; Ickes and Barnes, 1978; Tremblay, 1995; Zammichieli et al., 1988). Others found only limited empirical support for such a direct link and stressed the importance of gender ideology and expectations (Giudici et al., 2011). In any case, the influence of gender equality on sexual desire has been seldom if ever considered empirically.

## Conjugal interaction styles

Several typologies of conjugal interactions have been proposed within the last three to four decades (Kantor and Lehr, 1975; Lavee and Olson, 1991; Reiss and Lee, 1998; Roussel et al., 1976). Therefore, a typology of couple interaction styles was constructed in a longitudinal study of 1500 couples in Switzerland (Widmer et al., 2003). This typology was based on internal cohesion, either fusional or autonomous; role differentiation, highly gendered or tending toward equality between partners; and the couple's relationships to the surrounding environment, either closed or open.

The Bastion style of conjugal interactions stresses a high level of fusion between partners, meaning there is movement away from personal autonomy. The couple's position as a unit takes precedence over individual interests and orientations. Conjugal life is organized by status rights, consensus, and tradition. Men and women have very distinctive roles and responsibilities, and the gendering of family tasks is high. The Cocoon style also has a high level of both fusion and conjugal closure toward the environment. The distribution of domestic tasks and relational roles is, however, more equal than in the Bastion style. This interaction style is at once warm, closed, and relatively free of gender inequalities.

The Association style is very different from the two previous styles, as it features a high level of personal autonomy for both partners, a great openness between the couple and their environment, and a relatively egalitarian division of roles, tasks, and power. The main values that structure this interaction style are the quest for personal authenticity and the regular negotiation of individual rights between partners. The Companionship style shares these characteristics

of equality and openness but gives much stronger value to communality between partners rather than individual autonomy. Finally, the Parallel style is characterized by strongly sex-typed roles and tasks, a weak level of fusion with a high level of personal autonomy for partners and a markedly closed stance toward the couple's environment. Such couples feel threatened by their environment, yet they do not invest in the communality of their partnership.

## Hypotheses

Because these five types of couple interactions place distinctive emphases on the autonomy of partners, gender equality, and connections with the external environment, it is expected that they have different expectations about sexual intimacy and that this makes individuals develop unequal levels of sexual desire. This study aims to test the effects of these styles of conjugal interactions on attitudes toward sexuality, sexual desire, and sexual practices. Three hypotheses are proposed.

### H1

Individuals develop distinct expectations about sexuality according to their style of conjugal interaction. Couple interactions based on communality between partners, strong gender inequalities, and couple closure are expected to be associated with traditional attitudes toward sexuality stressing the importance of marriage and religion in sexuality. Oppositely, couple interaction styles based on gender equality, openness, and partner autonomy are expected to be associated with more recreational sexual attitudes.

### H2

Individuals develop distinctive levels of sexual desire intensity, unequal levels of sexual satisfaction, and varied frequency of sexual activities according to their style of conjugal interactions. The interaction styles focused on strong gender equality, high autonomy of partners, and openness to the outside world are expected to generate more intense sexual desires, a higher degree of sexual satisfaction, and more frequent sexual activity than styles based on gender inequality, the fusion of partners, and closure.

### H3

Following previous work concerning interaction styles, the importance of fidelity and conjugal satisfaction are also hypothesized to depend on sexual interaction styles. It is expected that couples with a high degree of autonomy between partners attribute less importance to fidelity and have a lower level of conjugal satisfaction compared to couples with a high degree of fusion between partners.

## Method

A questionnaire was administered to a random sample of 600 respondents (300 men and 300 women) living in the Canton of Geneva (Switzerland), aged between 25 and 45 years,

**Table 1** Attitudes and sexuality according to couple interactions' styles (mean and standard deviation).

n = 490	Bastion	Parallel	Cocoon	Companionship	Association	F
<i>Attitudes</i>						
Recreational [-2.3; 2.5]	-0.03 ± 0.96	-0.14 ± 1.00	-0.19 ± 0.89	-0.12 ± 1.10	0.29 ± 0.99	3.00*
Traditional [-1.7; 3.5]	0.11 ± 0.97	-0.09 ± 1.00	0.27 ± 0.99	0.06 ± 0.84	-0.22 ± 0.94	2.31 <sup>a</sup>
Communicative [-2.8; 1.9]	-0.09 ± 1.00	-0.06 ± 0.95	-0.13 ± 1.00	-0.08 ± 0.92	0.17 ± 0.99	1.14
<i>Intensity of desire</i>						
Solitary [0; 23]	8.48 ± 5.98	7.73 ± 6.15	8.53 ± 6.34	10.32 ± 6.08	11.13 ± 5.65	5.81**
Dyadic [2; 61]	39.71 ± 9.79	38.12 ± 10.36	38.92 ± 9.71	40.61 ± 7.42	43.82 ± 7.94	6.54**
<i>Frequency of sexual activities</i>						
Solitary [1; 9]	3.67 ± 2.23	3.61 ± 2.34	3.59 ± 2.13	4.34 ± 2.34	4.70 ± 2.10	5.54**
Dyadic [1; 9]	5.42 ± 1.78	5.37 ± 1.76	5.30 ± 1.39	5.61 ± 1.32	5.96 ± 1.77	2.65*
<i>Sexual satisfaction [5; 25]</i>	16.24 ± 5.58	16.15 ± 5.43	17.71 ± 5.49	17.82 ± 4.85	17.16 ± 5.12	2.01 <sup>a</sup>
<i>Conjugal satisfaction [26; 158]</i>	115.00 ± 19.92	102.22 ± 28.13	123.26 ± 21.42	126.96 ± 16.29	109.8 ± 24.17	16.54**
<i>Importance of fidelity [0; 1]</i>	0.73 ± 0.44	0.62 ± 0.48	0.83 ± 0.37	0.79 ± 0.41	0.59 ± 0.49	4.88**

\*\*p < 0.01; \*p < 0.05  
<sup>a</sup> p < 0.1.

with no distinctions concerning nationality or civil state. Analyses are based on a sub-sample of 490 individuals, married or not, who have been in partnerships for at least 3 months (for further details on the sample, refer to Widmer and Ammar, 2013, in this journal).

Couple interaction styles were assessed using a subset of measurements from *Couples contemporains, cohésion, régulation et conflit* (Widmer et al., 2003). Each individual response profile was referred to the closest interaction style found in previous studies using Quickcluster analysis (Amyotte, 1996). Twenty-three percent of the sample's couples of the sample were classified under the Bastion style, 25% as Parallel style; 12% as Companionship style; 16% as Cocoon style and 23% as Association.

A scale based on 20 items measuring distinctive sexual attitudes was constructed with items ranked from one ("It does not characterize me at all") to four ("It completely characterizes me"). Three dimensions were found with factor analysis: recreational (having sex mainly for fun), traditional (attaching great importance to marriage and religion in sexuality), and communicative (ascribing importance to sexual communication between partners). The intensity of sexual desire was estimated with a 13-item validated questionnaire (Spector et al., 1996). This scale measured the intensity of individuals' solitary and dyadic sexual desires. Sexual satisfaction was measured using one dimension of the Multidimensional Sexuality Questionnaire (Snell et al., 1993). Each item was rated on a scale from one ("not at all characteristic of me") to five ("very characteristic of me"). Conjugal satisfaction was measured by the 15-item validated Marital Adjustment Test (Plechaty et al., 1994).

The frequency of sexual activities was measured by asking, "How many times do you have sexual intercourse with a partner?" The answers ranged from one ("never") to nine ("more than once a day"). The same modality of answers applied to the question concerning the frequency of masturbation ("how many times do you masturbate alone?"). Finally, concerning the importance of fidelity, respondents

indicated whether they considered fidelity to be a necessary part of their conjugal lives. This question was rated from five ("very necessary") to one ("equal/do not mind").

## Results

Table 1 reports the average scores for sexual attitudes, solitary and dyadic desires, frequency of sexual activities, sexual and conjugal satisfaction, and the importance of fidelity according to the five styles of couple interactions. Recreational and traditional attitudes vary significantly according to interaction style. Couples with the Association style develop significantly more recreational attitudes than couples that have other styles of interaction. Cocoon and Bastion styles develop much stronger traditional attitudes.

Solitary and dyadic sexual desires also vary significantly by interaction style. Couples adopting Association or Companionship styles develop significantly more dyadic and solitary desires. In contrast, couples with the Parallel style develop lower levels of solitary and dyadic desires. The same results were found for the frequencies of solitary and dyadic sexual activities.

Couples with a Cocoon or a Companionship style of interaction report higher scores of sexual satisfaction, unlike couples in the Parallel style. Conjugal satisfaction also varies significantly by style. Individuals in Parallel and Association styles are less satisfied than individuals in Cocoon- and Companionship-style interactions. The same results were found for the importance of fidelity. Individuals in Parallel and Association styles give less importance to fidelity, while individuals in the Cocoon and Companionship styles grant a lot of importance to fidelity.

Table 2 shows the results from a series of regressions concerning attitudes toward sexuality. The effects of conjugal interaction styles are statistically controlled for sociodemographic variables such as sex, age, relationship duration, civil state, and parenthood. Those with the Association style

**Table 2** Linear regressions: sexual attitudes according to couple interactions' styles (standardized coefficients).

<i>n</i> = 318	Recreational attitudes		Traditional attitudes		Communicative attitudes	
<i>Couple interactions' style</i>						
Bastion (ref.)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Parallel	-0.038	0.023	-0.107	-0.075	0.016	-0.010
Cocoon	-0.071	-0.017	0.036	0.028	-0.001	0.004
Companionship	-0.032	-0.012	-0.041	-0.026	0.019	0.038
Association	0.147*	0.136*	-0.157*	-0.146*	0.126 <sup>a</sup>	0.106
<i>Sex</i>						
Women (ref.)		0.000		0.000		0.000
Men		0.385**		0.030		0.027
<i>Civil state</i>						
Non-married (ref.)		0.000		0.000		0.000
Married		-0.061		0.258**		-0.018
<i>Parenthood</i>						
Without children (ref.)		0.000		0.000		0.000
With children		0.007		-0.005		-0.010
<i>Age</i>						
< 30 years old (ref.)		0.000		0.000		0.000
From 31 to 35 years old		-0.014		-0.145 <sup>a</sup>		-0.018
From 36 to 40 years old		0.003		-0.100		-0.077
> 40 years old		-0.091		-0.166*		-0.146 <sup>a</sup>
<i>Couple duration</i>						
< 2 years (ref.)		0.000		0.000		0.000
From 2 to 5 years		-0.051		-0.110		-0.089
From 6 to 10 years		0.068		-0.222*		-0.143
> 10 years		0.003		-0.278*		-0.127
<i>Education</i>						
Other (ref.)		0.000		0.000		0.000
University		0.060		-0.042		-0.026
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.038	0.201	0.028	0.081	0.014	0.047
$\Delta R$		0.164		0.053		0.033

\*\**p* < 0.01; \**p* < 0.05.

<sup>a</sup> *p* < 0.1.

develop significantly more recreational attitudes and significantly less traditional ones than others do. Table 3 presents the results of another series of linear regressions. Compared to the Bastion style (reference category), couples in the Association style develop significantly more solitary and dyadic desires and experience a higher frequency of solitary and dyadic sexual activities. However, despite these high levels of sexual desire and activity, they do not present with high levels sexual satisfaction. Indeed, individuals with a Companionship style of interacting develop greater sexual satisfaction.

The importance given to fidelity and the level of conjugal satisfaction also vary according to conjugal interaction styles (Table 4). Fidelity has less importance for couples in Association and Parallel styles, which develop less conjugal satisfaction at the same time. Contrarily, couples with Companionship and cocoon styles develop greater conjugal satisfaction and attach more importance to fidelity.

## Discussion

The results of this study emphasized the importance of couples' interaction styles in understanding sexual desire from a micro sociological perspective. Couples in an Association style of interaction develop more recreational attitudes and higher solitary and dyadic sexual desires, and they enjoy sexual activities more frequently. However, they do not actually possess correspondingly higher sexual satisfaction. On the other hand, couples in Companionship and Cocoon styles develop greater sexual satisfaction but relatively lower levels of sexual desire. As they develop less recreational attitudes, they may be more easily satisfied by their everyday sexual lives. The results of the study also confirm the findings of previous studies on conjugal interaction styles and conjugal satisfaction (Girardin et al., 2005; Kellerhals et al., 2004; Widmer et al., 2003, 2004a, b, c). Interaction styles rooted in the autonomy of partners are associated with less conjugal satisfaction than those for

**Table 3** Linear regressions: sexual desires, activities and satisfaction according to couple interactions' styles (standardized coefficients).

<i>n</i> = 490	Intensity of solitary desire		Intensity of dyadic desire		Frequency of solitary activities		Frequency of dyadic activities		Sexual satisfaction	
<i>Couple interactions' style</i>										
Bastion (ref.)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Parallel	-0.052	-0.018	-0.060	-0.041	0.001	-0.067	-0.014	-0.094 <sup>a</sup>	-0.004	-0.056
Cocoon	-0.001	0.020	0.005	0.026	-0.015	0.007	-0.027	-0.034	0.103*	0.098 <sup>a</sup>
Companionship	0.102*	0.116*	0.047	0.057	0.109*	0.118*	0.036	0.060	0.099 <sup>a</sup>	0.109*
Association	0.176**	0.128*	0.212**	0.184**	0.200**	0.164**	0.134*	0.092 <sup>a</sup>	0.076	0.055
<i>Sex</i>										
Women (ref.)		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000
Men		0.370**		0.313**		0.476**		-0.093*		-0.025
<i>Civil state</i>										
Non-married (ref.)		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000
Married		-0.176**		-0.121*		-0.112*		0.015		0.035
<i>Parenthood</i>										
Without children (ref.)		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000
With children		-0.001		0.027		0.031		0.031		0.070
<i>Age</i>										
< 30 years old (ref.)		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000
From 31 to 35 years old		0.076		-0.080		-0.019		0.028		-0.028
From 36 to 40 years old		0.070		-0.065		0.035		-0.021		-0.035
> 40 years old		-0.011		-0.075		-0.025		-0.115 <sup>a</sup>		-0.035
<i>Couple duration</i>										
< 2 years (ref.)		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000
From 2 to 5 years		0.011		-0.015		-0.003		-0.150**		-0.087
From 6 to 10 years		0.062		-0.045		0.023		-0.401**		-0.338**
> 10 years		0.022		-0.018		-0.008		-0.401**		-0.325**
<i>Education</i>										
Other (ref.)		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000		0.000
University		0.036		-0.035		0.050		-0.160**		-0.125**
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.045	0.216	0.056	0.167	0.045	0.281	0.022	0.162	0.017	0.092
$\Delta R$		0.170		0.111		0.236		0.140		0.075

\*\**p* < 0.01; \**p* < 0.05.

<sup>a</sup> *p* < 0.1.

couples stressing communality and consensus as the basis for their relationships. Indeed, couples in Association and Parallel styles present with less conjugal satisfaction than couples in Cocoon and Companionship styles. Therefore, conjugal styles associated with a high level of sexual desire and a high frequency of sexual encounters do not necessarily lead to a high level of conjugal satisfaction.

The effects of gender equality are less obvious. Couples in styles of interaction featuring strong inequality between men and women, such as Bastion and Parallel, do not develop significantly lower levels of desire or sexual activity. However, it cannot be concluded that egalitarian values within a relationship do not matter for conjugal intimacy. Indeed, several studies claimed that strongly gendered roles generate more problems than egalitarian interactions, in particular for couples who value the autonomy of partners (Fortin and Thierault, 1995; Girardin et al., 2005; Houts

et al., 1996; Johnson and Ferraro, 2000; Renzetti, 1992; Tremblay, 1995).

Those results help explain how social factors associated with partnerships shape sexual desire. Indeed, couples' interaction styles, to a large extent, depend on social class and the positions of individuals within the family's life course (Girardin et al., 2005; Kellerhals et al., 2004; Widmer et al., 2003, 2004a, b, c). Couples in the Association style belong predominantly to younger cohorts and possess greater cultural and economic resources. Oppositely, couples in Bastion and Cocoon styles more often belong to lower social standings and older cohorts. Therefore, sexuality is indirectly shaped by a variety of social mechanisms.

The direction of the causal link between interaction style and sexual desire is still not completely clear. Longitudinal analysis done on a three-wave panel shows average to strong effects from conjugal interaction styles on intimacy

**Table 4** Regressions: importance granted to fidelity and conjugal satisfaction according to couple interactions' styles (standardized coefficients).

<i>n</i> = 490	Importance of fidelity		Conjugal satisfaction	
<i>Couple interactions' style</i>				
Bastion (ref.)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Parallel	−0.514 <sup>a</sup>	−0.540 <sup>a</sup>	−0.288**	−0.253**
Cocoon	0.340	0.280	0.121*	0.118*
Companionship	0.580*	0.540 <sup>a</sup>	0.156**	0.160**
Association	−0.631*	−0.656*	−0.091 <sup>a</sup>	−0.115*
<i>Sex</i>				
Women (ref.)		0.000		0.000
Men		−0.202		−0.071
<i>Civil state</i>				
Non-married (ref.)		0.000		0.000
Married		0.496 <sup>a</sup>		0.047
<i>Parenthood</i>				
Without children (ref.)		0.000		0.000
With children		−0.132		0.027
<i>Age</i>				
< 30 years old (ref.)		0.000		0.000
From 31 to 35 years old		−0.217		−0.043
From 36 to 40 years old		−0.443		−0.019
> 40 years old		−0.247		−0.074
<i>Couple duration</i>				
< 2 years (ref.)		0.000		0.000
From 2 to 5 years		0.247		−0.076
From 6 to 10 years		−0.224		−0.197*
> 10 years		−0.461		−0.146*
<i>Education</i>				
Other (ref.)		0.000		0.000
University		−0.116		−0.019
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.120	0.081	0.020	0.146
$\Delta R$		0.056		0.026

\*\**p* < 0.01; \**p* < 0.05.<sup>a</sup> *p* < 0.1.

problems, but only weak effects of past problems on styles (Widmer et al., 2004c). It follows that the Association between sexuality and couples' interaction styles might develop as a cumulative process, the precise logic for which is yet to be uncovered by empirical research.

## Disclosure of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest concerning this article.

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